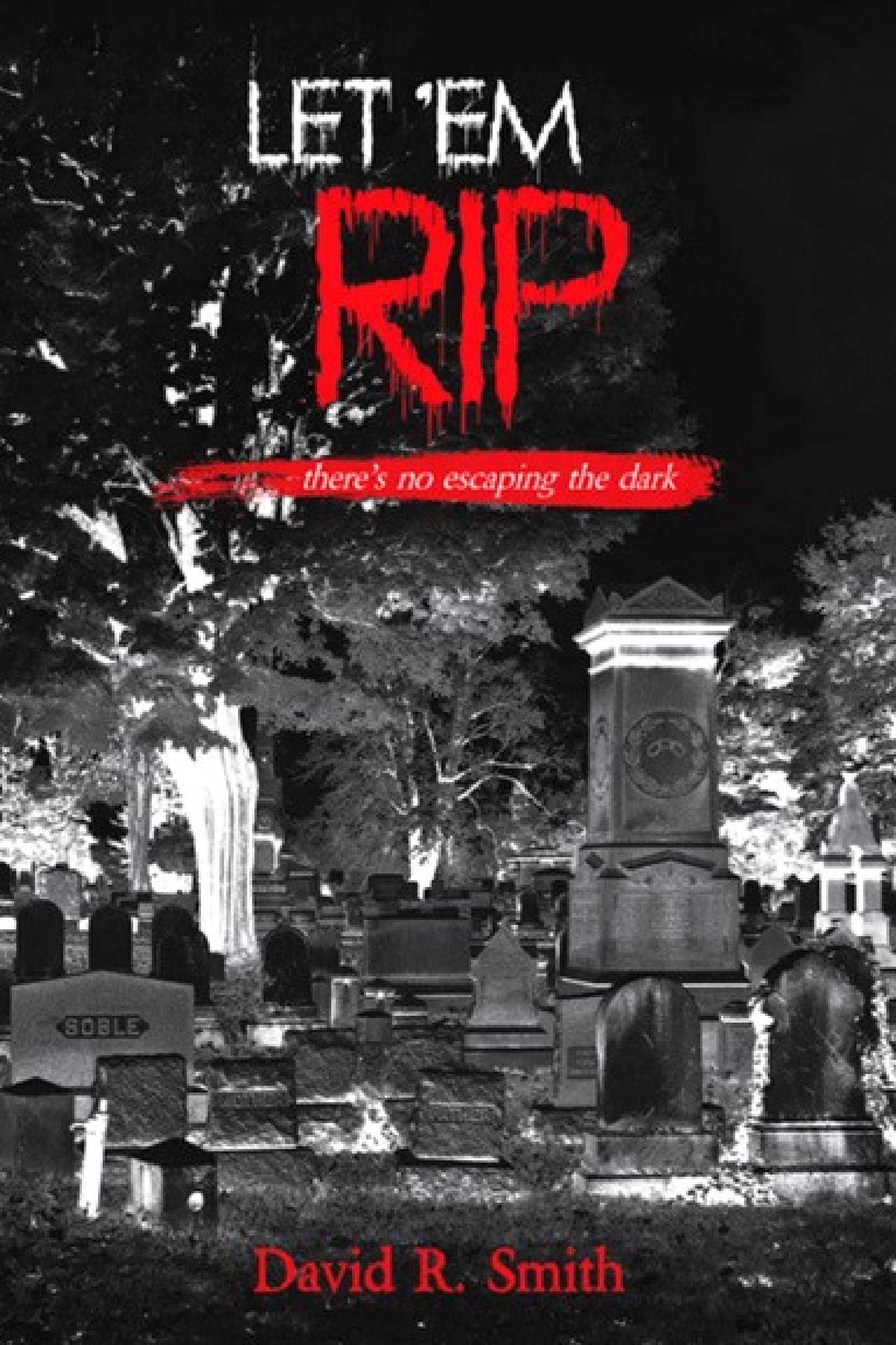
LET 'EM
RIP
there's no escaping the dark
David R. Smith

Delaney screamed and tried to jerk away, but the hand clamped tight around his leg ...

The body attached to it twisted onto its back with lightning speed, snapped its eyes open and hissed at him. It had neither the characteristics of a man nor a woman. The featureless face was mottled and wrinkled, ancient in its appearance. Its lips were red and cracked with oozing pustules; the eyes hardened black pits, feral, lethal. The mouth yawned wide, and Delaney heard stiff jaw bones cracking and popping. Gossamer strands of saliva clinging to its jagged yellow teeth glinted in the candlelight.

*"*Save me,*" the creature uttered, and then collapsed to the floor with a loud exhale.*

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Let 'Em RIP

Also by David R. Smith

The Halloween House
Darkness Falling
The Door To Andara

Let 'Em RIP

13 HORROR STORIES

< < < > > >

David R. Smith

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For my wife, Jennifer,
whose love keeps the demons at bay

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Many eyes make lighter work for a writer. I am deeply grateful for my family and friends who have read these manuscripts over the years. Without assurances I was on the right track–or gentle reminders that I was making no sense at all–these stories would have never come to fruition. Above all, I thank my wife, Jennifer, for her indulgence and patience with my writing (I know horror is *not* your cup of tea, dear). I also wish to thank my parents, for all they've done to nurture and support my literary free spirit. Also, thanks to Tim Wright, a fabulous horror writer, for showing me a few tricks of the trade. (I know I still have a lot to learn, but you've given me a great start.)

Finally, a big thank you goes out to both Jeff Hamson for digging up a killer photograph from the archives, and to Jennifer Hamson for taking it and producing truly haunting cover art. Your graphic design skills are unmatched.

"And this is the forbidden truth, the unspeakable taboo-that evil is not always repellent but frequently attractive; that it has the power to make of us not simply victims, as nature and accident do, but active accomplices."

–Joyce Carol Oates

"The truth is that monsters are real, and ghosts are real, too. They live inside us, and sometimes they win."
–Stephen King

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Foreword

Are the dead paying attention to us?

When I considered what theme, if any, tied most of these stories together, I kept coming back to this question. I suppose it depends on whom you ask. There are those who believe that at the point of death we wink out—here today, gone tomorrow. Not a very religious notion, but it does free up our Sunday mornings.

Then there are those who believe in life after death, who on occasion claim to have interactions with the dearly departed. If this is true, if we are more than aesthetically pleasing sacks of bones, if we are souls who travel on when the body expires, then doesn't it stand to reason that our memories may outlast our corporeal shells? And if we had a close emotional tie to a person or place in life, then is it so absurd to think we might carry a yearning (or a grudge) to the grave?

At some point in our lives I think we all wonder if a deceased loved one is peering over our shoulder. Maybe I've read too much King, Koontz and Barker, because when things go bump in the night, I instantly wonder who (or what) might be stopping by for a visit. I've never had an authentic experience of the occult variety before, but that's all right with me. If they go the way they do for my protagonists, I'll pass, thank you. I prefer sanity. But still a part of me wonders: If the dead are all around us, how far is their reach?

It is this insatiable curiosity that draws me to horror fiction. The genre's themes often focus on mortality, loss, and retribution. Ultimately, horror fiction celebrates life and the resiliency of the human spirit; however, as Stephen King notes, sometimes the ghosts and the monsters win. When this happens, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We live in a world of consequences, where every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Our choices in life follow us into death, or so I believe. The dead are paying attention. And they're all around us, refusing to stay quiet.

In this collection you'll encounter not only ghosts, vampires, monsters, serial killers, and aliens, but also forlorn characters who, essentially, have bitten the apple and been kicked out of Eden. Again, *consequences*. We Americans live insular lives, detached from the spiritual hinterland of our ancestors, perpetually distracted by our high-tech world of flat-screen TVs, iPads, and cell phones. But when the power fails and the lights go out, there's no "app" to protect us from the denizens of the dark.

Let us hope we have nothing to hide.

Part I
Denizens of the Dark

"Sanity calms, but madness is more interesting."
–John Russell

SINS OF OUR FATHERS

He had never been to this part of the city before. Never wanted to, truth be known. Night had fallen over an hour ago, and the bronze sheen of restaurants, shops, and bars spilled civilized comfort into the chill air. Judging by the address of his destination, soon he would not have the light anymore.

Father Joseph Delaney walked briskly with his head low and hands thrust deep into his pockets. He turned left down a rain-slicked side street where the sodium vapor lamps had all been smashed or allowed to burn out. Either case, nobody had bothered to fix them. Perhaps it was better, he thought, to keep this part of the city in blackness.

Hide its perpetual shame.

The darkness here was the deepest he'd felt in a long time. And he was not alone. Dim outlines of people passed by him, trailing profanity-laced conversations.

"Did you see what that son of a bitch did to me?"

"I'd kill him. Swear to God, I would."

Delaney winced when he heard the Lord's name taken in vain. Still, he was growing used to it, in the same way a man grows used to his creeping arthritis as the years pile on. There was nothing to do but accept the vulgarity of the times and ignore it, since there was little to be done to change it.

Accept, ignore, move on. Is that what his faith had become? Sadly, he knew it was.

Delaney checked the address Father Nicholas O'Brien had sent him. He hadn't heard from his old friend in many months, and privately feared the worst. And then out of the blue arrived a letter begging Delaney to meet him here ... only where was *here*? All around him he saw nothing but dilapidated buildings, gated liquor storefronts, and the occasional forlorn shrub that did more to sink Delaney's spirits than the wretched souls drifting by him.

Even nature couldn't abide this place. Why should he be surprised?

Up ahead he caught a glint of moonlight on the grimy glass of a warehouse. The old brick-and-mortar building was the hub of attention, as clumps of jostling teenagers huddled by its doors. Delaney watched the doors open, admit the black-clad masses, and close again with a groan. He kept his distance as more people approached the club, emerging in droves from the nearby alleys and parking lots like wraiths patched together in the gloom.

Delaney shook his head and sighed. This was it. Why would O'Brien want to meet him in such a place? *A night club*? Though he loved the younger priest and

trusted him implicitly, he longed to be back in his modest yet comfortable Upper West Side rectory of St. Gregory's Cathedral, sipping his sherry and reading the New Testament. The New Testament calmed him, gave him hope. Though it would be sacrilege to say so, he harbored a strong distaste for the Old Testament. Those stories (and Revelations too, he had to admit) had probably done more harm than good over the ages, since passages were usually ripped out of context and flung like arrows at an enemy.

Delaney crossed the street and stood alone in front of the club. *Plenty of suffering in there*. Maybe O'Brien, a priest in his thirties who'd joined Delaney's parish five years ago as a parochial vicar before moving on to a church of his own, was trying to save a few lost souls. If so, he should be commended for the effort, even if, in Delaney's opinion, it was a losing cause.

But that was just the kind of man O'Brien was. He remembered the stories O'Brien shared with him about his past. Growing up in orphanages, shuffled from one abusive home to another by foster parents who were in it for the money rather than the child. It was a classic and unfortunately clichéd story of a tragic upbringing for a child who'd lost his parents at a young age. After turning sixteen, O'Brien lived on the streets for over a year with the urchins who fed him his addictions and showed him a life devoid of meaning and grace.

Later, while lying in vomit on a jail cell floor, his face bloodied and broken from a run-in with a guard, O'Brien heard the call of the church. Delaney counseled the young man for many years. He emerged from the

chrysalis of seminary six years later a changed human being, bright and focused, much to Delaney's delight. His ordeals would have broken weaker men. But O'Brien only appeared stronger because of them.

Yet there was also something increasingly *bizarre* about O'Brien, for lack of a better term. For one, it was O'Brien's pallor. Even on the brightest summer days and in the most robust health, he appeared almost cadaverous, his eyes washed out and pale. Secondly, the man never seemed to sleep. He called Delaney at all hours of the night with insights or questions about heaven and hell, the nuances of Jesus' more quixotic teachings, and other weighty matters that Delaney discussed with him until he fell asleep on the phone.

Despite these late night tête-à-têtes, O'Brien's sermons the next day at mass would be animated, his grasp of the biblical teachings impressive as usual. Yet Delaney couldn't shake the feeling his friend was harboring a secret, perhaps an illness of some sort that might account for the ashen skin and emaciated frame. Cancer once crossed his mind. He'd never asked O'Brien, and chalked the unsettling countenance up to poor health as a result of drugs and alcohol in his adolescence.

Delaney dragged his attention away from the past and focused it on the nightclub. He wondered if he needed to wait for the door to open or if he could take the initiative to do it himself. From inside the building came the deep throb of music, a concussive bass that audibly rattled the windows on the upper floors. He crossed himself and muttered a Hail Mary, then seized the tarnished bronze handle and yanked the door open.

The music struck him like a mallet to the chest. Hot air gasped from the building, instantly fogging his glasses. He took them off and wiped them clean on the sleeve of his black trench coat, and repositioned them on his face. His hand unconsciously lifting to his throat to touch the Roman collar, Delaney stepped into the club.

The blaring music didn't offend him half as much as the sight of exposed human flesh glistening under the flickering strobe lights. A behemoth of a man stepped up to Delaney on his left, a tribal tattoo twisting up the side of his swarthy neck and face.

"You lost, padre?" he rumbled, folding muscular arms across an enormous chest.

Delaney turned to the man. "I'm looking for Father O'Brien."

The bouncer's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"Father Joseph Delaney," he said. "I was invited," he added, in case it was necessary.

He waited patiently for the bouncer to let him pass. At first the bouncer continued to stare menacingly at Delaney. Then a shift occurred in his face, a softening of his chiseled features, as if an unexpectedly pleasant thought had crossed his mind. He raised an arm and pointed in the direction of the dance floor. A smile rose to his lips.

"You must be the one." The bouncer's tone was measurably softer. "He's over there."

Delaney squinted into the lights. "Where? I don't see him."

"At the end of the bar," the giant said, pointing. "Where Father O'Brien sits every night."

"*Every* night?"

"Yes, Father." Awe crept into the man's voice. "He comes for us every night."

"I see."

"You should go to him now."

Delaney nodded, uncertain what to make of the bouncer's unmistakable reverence for O'Brien.

He turned away and edged up to the dance floor. His heart lurched at the display of grotesque carnality before him. Delaney scanned the club for an alternate way around to the bar, but the place was too crowded to circumvent the dance floor safely. Surely a fire code was being violated, he thought. But human violation was apparently the entertainment *du jour* here anyway. Androgynously dressed men and women bumped and ground against each other, their hips thrusting to the pounding music. Sometimes it was women in lusty embraces; sometimes pairs or trios of men. Hands intruded on each other's lithe bodies, lifting skirts, sliding down pants, wriggling up shirts. And the only expression on anyone's slack face was lusty desire. Dismayed, Delaney knew he was staring into the pit of Sodom, at people for whom sinning was as natural as breathing.

His throat tightening, Delaney realized he had no choice. He would have to cross—join *them*, if only for a moment—to find O'Brien. He strained to see the bar on the other side of the writhing mob. He saw nobody wearing the traditional accoutrements of the church. Of course, O'Brien could have come *incognito.* Delaney

wished he had, since he felt the stares of everyone in the place boring into his skin.

They're looking to me for strength. He wished he could believe that. Wanted to believe. *I'm the Light and the Way.*

No, he answered himself. Only a fool would believe that here.

Gathering his courage, Delaney took a timid step onto the dance floor, muttering apologies to the Lord for every unintended contact with human flesh.

He was touched more than once. A hand slid flirtatiously across the back of his neck. Another fondled his crotch. A tongue slithered into his ear. When he turned to look, the faces were one and the same, all mindless, all entranced. They reached out for him, arms intertwining with his, pulling him back. He fought, ripped himself free of their clutches, tearing the fabric of his coat. He could hear their mingled grunts over the music and smell their heady musk rising off their sweaty bodies. Memories of life growing up on a farm in Nebraska came back to him. Barns and fornicating animals.

Delaney begged the Lord's help as he pushed his way past their groping limbs. Suddenly he cried out. A searing pain stung the tender patch of skin below his left ear. He touched himself there and his fingers came away bloody. *Dear God, I've been bit.* Another memory from his childhood bloomed before him. The cornfield behind his house, playing hide and seek with his brothers and cousins. Darkness falling, getting lost, screaming for help and thrashing wildly through the cornrows. He felt the same right now, alone, desperate, his faith tested like

Job's, only why *now* and why in this place he had no idea. The Lord worked in mysterious ways. He needed to find O'Brien.

Suddenly a powerful set of hands gripped his shoulders and dragged him forward. Before he knew what was happening, he was pulled free of the thrashing mob and propped up against the side of the bar. The crowd stitched itself back together, an organism healing itself, without once slowing its frenetic movements. Delaney felt like a tiny fish regurgitated from the belly of a whale.

"Father O'Brien," he panted, grateful to see his friend.

"I'm glad you could make it, Father Delaney." He was indeed wearing street clothes as Delaney suspected, a faded blue cotton shirt, open at the throat, and tattered gray slacks. *He looks more like a vagrant than a dignified Catholic priest*. And his color ... my God, was the man dying?

O'Brien extracted a handkerchief from his back pocket and gave it to the older clergyman. "You're bleeding."

"I think I was bit!" he exclaimed over the music, dabbing at the still-flowing wound.

"It's possible."

Delaney studied the gaunt priest for a moment. His furtive eyes danced back and forth, alert and eager, appearing to change color every few seconds in the ever-shifting strobe lights. His graying hair had thinned noticeably since the last time he saw him. Delaney felt a pang of sorrow for O'Brien, whom he'd always considered a friend. Was the man secretly dying? Could this account

for why he was spending so much time in this godforsaken place?

"You look pained, Father," O'Brien said, squeezing Delaney's arm lightly. "What troubles one of God's faithful lambs?"

Delaney didn't like the younger priest's tone. "What troubles me," he said tersely, "is this place."

"Oh?"

"Why did you want me to come here?"

O'Brien smiled as though at a private joke, and snapped his fingers in the air behind Delaney's back. He turned and saw a tall, spindly man dressed in a white silk shirt and white pants approach them. His skin was pale as bleached bone, his lips and eyes a dusky pink. An albino.

"This is Ghost," O'Brien said by way of introduction. He ordered a gin and tonic, and then looked at Delaney. "Anything for you, Father? It might help."

"Help with what?"

O'Brien grinned again. In the flashing lights his face looked ghoulish, his teeth sharp whittled nubs. "With what I have to tell you."

"None for me, thanks."

"You look like you could use a drink," Ghost intoned, absently wiping the bar with a soiled rag. "We have a special for priests tonight."

"I said no." Delaney averted his eyes. He wished the peculiar man would leave them alone. His strangely hollow voice unnerved him. And his vacant, unwavering gaze reminded him of expressions he'd seen on dead men.

"Take it easy on poor Ghost, he's had a rough go

of it lately." O'Brien tipped the albino, who pocketed the cash somewhere on his person. Delaney didn't see where he put it—the man's hands were too fast. "The good Father here will need a sherry, he just doesn't know it yet."

Winking at O'Brien, Ghost vanished to make the drinks.

O'Brien turned to Delaney with a smug expression that made his jaw clench. "Now, let's see ... where were we?"

"I want an explanation," demanded Delaney.

"I'm sure you do. You are probably wondering why, of all the places on earth, I would drag you to this hellhole on a Saturday night—or any other night of the week."

"Watch your language, Father O'Brien."

"My language?" O'Brien swept the dance floor with his arm. "Do you not see for yourself? This *is* hell, Father. And we are the gatekeepers."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about redemption."

"Redemption?" Now it was his turn to laugh. "Yours or theirs?"

"Yours."

A few seconds later Ghost returned with the glasses and set them on the bar between them. O'Brien lifted his glass, inspected its contents in the pulsing red-orange light, and downed half of its contents in one gulp. Delaney ignored his.

"Your beliefs have many cracks, Father," said O'Brien. "Some big enough to shatter the whole foundation of your faith."

Delaney frowned. "What do you know about my faith? You've only known me for a few years, and if you recall, *I'm* the one who mentored *you* when you were just a doe-eyed priest fresh out of seminary."

"Indeed," he replied. "I remember. And I also recall our long conversations about church life and morality, as well as a certain remark you made to me not long ago. You were angry when you said it, but I could tell you meant it anyway. It had depth of feeling behind the words, as though you'd been pondering it for a long time."

Delaney searched his memory for a defining moment with O'Brien but came up empty. "What did I say?"

"You said, 'If the Holy See keeps turning his back on the poor abuse victims, there'll be nothing left of the church worth saving.' Do you remember saying it, Father?"

He thought for a moment. Certainly he'd had his doubts over the years. Who didn't? The church had its share of controversies. One sexual abuse victim cover-up and payoff after another. It was sickening, demoralizing. He tried not to let it eat away at his faith.

But sometimes ...

Sometimes the pain was too much to bear.

"The abuse cases," he finally said, picking up the sherry. "I was talking about all the scandal and cover up."

O'Brien nodded. "You said we, the priests, had to do something. If necessary, take back the church and give it to the people. And you said something else that night, something I'll never forget."

"Pray, tell."

"You said, 'There is no hiding from the shame of our past. It will catch up to us, in one way or another. If we choose to ignore it, then we choose to damn ourselves.'"

"But remember the context of that remark—"

"I remember. We were talking about the church making amends to the families—not just monetarily, but spiritually—and once and for all washing its hands of its moral corruption by going back to its ancient roots, ministering to the neediest instead of counting its coin, teaching the gospel the way Jesus taught it and lived it, and above all saving the cursed from the fires of hell. Would you recant those words now, Father? Would you admit you no longer believe that which you've taught me?"

A chill settled in Delaney's bones. He was at a profound loss of words. "What did you do, Nicholas? Why have you been coming here every night? What secrets have you been keeping from me?"

O'Brien finished off the rest of his drink. "Do you want to see something?"

Delaney didn't know how to respond. A trembling started in his bad left leg, the one sliced up by shrapnel long ago in Korea. A whole other lifetime ago.

"Let's go to church." O'Brien took Delaney gently by the arm and guided him away from the bar. Delaney

almost resisted, but he let himself be led past a long row of booths occupied by stoic men and women who stared enthralled at the orgiastic dancing. Their ashen faces turned upward at Delaney as he passed, the faint smiles on their wine-tinged lips and the earnestness in their eyes suggesting the possibility of hope. But what hope could he bring to these people? He saw the shadow of painful experiences in each of their expressions. He knew that pain well, and felt a stab of it himself. The pain of living in a world full of death. And unforgiving memories.

They reached a corner of the nightclub and stopped. A narrow doorway was covered by a black velvet curtain. The size and shape of it reminded Delaney of a confessional. O'Brien reached out and pulled the black curtain aside. "You'll want to see this for yourself," he said.

Delaney felt a surge of anxiety at the sight of the shadowy corridor, an urge to run away and not look back at what lay beyond. He felt a scream start to bubble in his throat. The relentlessly pounding music seemed to change into something more ominous, the mortars of North Korean artillery, exploding all around him. He massaged his temples as he felt his mind start to detach from his body, float upward and out, cross the thousands of miles and the dozens of years in only seconds, until ...

... *the ambush was over in seconds. The detonating shell ripped apart the foxhole near Yongsan hill. All six of the men lay mutilated beyond recognition, pieces of their bodies strewn about like spent shell casings. Their eyes, the ones not blown out of their skulls, stared accusingly at Delaney,*

blaming him for running away in blind terror at the last minute. A crushing feeling of guilt came over Delaney. A lot of good young men of C Company, 9th regiment died that day in the attack, and all of them were his friends. Yet, by dint of cowardice, he was spared, save for a lacerated leg. Spared by a higher power he cursed for years afterward for its moral indifference toward human suffering, and for not fortifying him in the face of war. Ultimately, he too should have been lying bloody and broken in the foxhole ...

The memories of the carnage that day persisted despite the passage of time. Eventually he found the church, after years of seeking absolution in the secular philosophies of men. He hoped, with enough personal sacrifice and ardent prayer, the past could be forgotten. That the soldiers would finally find peace, and their ghosts rest from their ceaseless screaming in his dreams.

For a long time the church had given him solace, only now in this nightclub they were back.

As Delaney followed O'Brien through the cloak of darkness, he saw his platoon again just as they were the day they died, their lips drawn back in horrible rictuses, their bloodied faces staring up at him from the mud. One of them suddenly moved, and Delaney jumped back. He stretched a bony finger toward Delaney and lashed out, slicing through his coat and scratching his skin—*scratching his physical skin!* Delaney cried out in pain and horror and staggered sideways, crashing into the wall beside him. He saw O'Brien stop in the dark and look back. *My God, is the man smiling? Is he actually* laughing *at my suffering?* Delaney's lungs labored for air. The images

from Yongsan hill sank back into the murk from which they sprang, but the scrape on his arm continued to burn.

"H-how much farther, Nicholas?" he stammered. "I'd really like to go home now."

"We're almost there."

O'Brien opened a door. A blast of hot, dank air struck Delaney in the face. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of it—vile, bodily secretions—and gagged into his handkerchief. What was this place? It stunk like a mortuary, or worse ... a charnel house. As the door widened he saw the interior of a large room with a cathedral ceiling, bathed in glowing red candlelight. Shadows leapt up the stone walls. Delaney stumbled ahead despite his reservations, refusing to go back without his friend. He stole a glance over his shoulder to see if the others—his platoon, whom he guiltily wished would *stay dead* in that foxhole—were still behind him. He saw nothing.

"What is this place?" He stood at the edge of the room and coughed into his handkerchief. The smell wafting around his head was almost palpable, like a thin membrane he could reach out and tear with his fingernails.

"I call it Church," O'Brien answered, spreading his arms majestically and turning to face Delaney. "And these are my congregants. I am all they have, Father, in this miserable world."

Delaney gasped.

"The church has forsaken its moral duty to them. *God* has forsaken them. I have not."

The floor squirmed. Every square inch of it was covered by the quivering flesh of bent naked bodies, men and women of all ages, lying head to foot, pieced together like a morbid puzzle. They appeared to be sleeping. Delaney watched O'Brien walk amidst the elbows, shoulders, and knees to a small dais in the middle of the room. A few shifted in their sleep, bumping into the next one, who in turn disturbed another. The ripple effect continued throughout the room, but no one awoke. For that small miracle, Delaney was grateful.

O'Brien lowered himself onto a regal, red-upholstered chair. In front of him sat an ornately carved altar with a single gold chalice. O'Brien beamed proudly down at Delaney, who shrank away from the lunatic grin on the younger priest's face.

"Welcome to my church, Father Delaney."

Delaney shook his head in disbelief. "What have you done to these poor people?" he whispered. His left leg began trembling again. A dull throb made him rub it.

"They are waiting for the ceremony to begin."

"You're insane," Delaney hissed.

O'Brien's smile faltered. "Am I? Was it not you who said, 'One atones for sin through sacrifice. You needn't wait for church permission to aid the sick and dying'?"

"You have misunderstood my teachings, Nicholas."

"I have come back to help those who society disdains, the very same who fed and nourished me through the hard years of my childhood, who taught me how to survive when no one else cared. I almost forgot

about them, but I heard their call one night in my dreams and I answered it. The lepers of our time congregate here, Father, and they need a messiah to lead them."

"Lead them?" Delaney's gaze swept the room again. The putrid-sweet rot of death hung over the bodies, yet he saw their chests rise and fall with breath. "Lead them where?"

"Out of Hell and into Christ's open arms."

O'Brien closed his eyes and started to chant. "This is my blood. Take it and drink from it. Do this in memory of me!"

"Be quiet, Father O'Brien!" Delaney stared in horror as an undulation swept through the resting bodies, a current of energy rousing them from sleep. A few raised their heads and arms, or lifted a leg. Others moaned and stirred and began to sit up.

Delaney took a step backward, preparing to run.

"Come closer." O'Brien stopped chanting and regarded him with renewed interest. "Join us."

"I-I'm leaving." Delaney's voice quaked in the stifling air. "You should come with me. It's not too late."

"Don't you want to see what happens next?"

"I would rather not."

"You are the rock, Father Delaney, upon which I build my church."

A hand struck out and grabbed Delaney's ankle.

Delaney screamed and tried to jerk away, but the hand was clamped tight around his leg. The body attached to it twisted onto its back with lightning speed, snapped its eyes open and hissed at him. It had neither the characteristics of a man nor a woman. The featureless

face was mottled and wrinkled, ancient in its appearance. Its lips were red and cracked with oozing pustules, the eyes hardened black pits, feral, lethal. The mouth yawned wide, and Delaney heard stiff jaw bones cracking and popping. Gossamer strands of saliva clinging to its jagged yellow teeth glinted in the candlelight.

Vampire.

The body trembled all over as it fought to sit up. A strangled sound escaped its throat ... a word it tried to force out. Instinctively, Delaney leaned forward to hear. The stench exuding from its mouth made his stomach churn.

"*Save me*," the creature uttered, and then collapsed to the floor with a loud exhale. The hand around Delaney's ankle loosened enough for him to jerk his leg out of its grip.

The others were awake now, rising like vipers and slithering toward O'Brien. Delaney saw a knife in the younger priest's hand, extended over his exposed left forearm. Underneath his arm was the chalice. Delaney cringed as O'Brien made the first slit lengthwise in his skin, the red blood pouring like a fountain into the cup.

"Take this and drink, my children." He swayed on his feet as his blood filled the chalice.

The bodies tittered and cooed like eager children as they gathered around the altar, their hollow eyes widening greedily at the sight of fresh blood.

"You have waited patiently for your meal," O'Brien continued in a soothing voice, looking about at the vampires creeping up around him. His eyes met Delaney's above their mussed heads.

"Will you not feed the hungry, Father Delaney? Feed them, and let Christ into their lives? What other hope do they—and *you*—have? Perhaps you can redeem yourself in the eyes of the demons that haunt you."

"My demons do not demand blood," he said.

"Don't they?"

He felt spent, his capacity for terror exhausted. His eyes slid over to the flickering, wrought-iron candelabrum standing beside him. Without thinking, he tipped the candelabrum over and spilled the hot wax and flames onto the writhing masses. Several shrieked in pain and climbed over the tops of others in their way, as the fire spread quickly from one body to the next. The inferno ate its way through their flesh quickly, and in just moments all the vampires were crying out, lashing at each other, lunging for O'Brien.

"No!" he roared. "You can't do this to my church!" But his protests were cut off by the bodies throwing themselves onto the priest, tearing at his vestments, ripping into his throat. They engulfed him, devoured him, their suffering becoming his, as O'Brien would have probably wanted it in the end. As the priest's screams died away, Delaney turned and fled down the hall and back out into the nightclub.

To his surprise, the music had stopped. The crowded dance floor was still, everyone staring at him with an odd mixture of curiosity and sadness. He ignored their stares as he plowed his way through them. He half expected the bouncer with the neck tattoo (disguising puncture marks perhaps?) to stop him, but the man stood aside and let Delaney escape out the open door.

He shot out into the night, running as fast and as far as his exhausted legs would carry him, not daring to look back. Knowing what he'd see if he did. He ran until his lungs burned and his heart was a painful hammer in his chest. He ran wildly and blindly and without reason except to get away from the relentless din of mortar shells and soldiers screaming and helicopters thrashing the black sky; and when at last he did look back, his legs turned to stone and his eyes widened in horror as the streaking missile fell from the sky straight for him. He didn't feel a thing except for the momentary succor of imminent death as the shell dropped on him and exploded, throwing Delaney into the foxhole with his platoon, who wrapped their split and knotty arms around him and dragged him down into the mud.

UNDER THE SKIN

The junkie's name is Tommy Ferguson and he is going to die.

Nine years in narcotics—years when I've seen just about every depravity one human can do to another—and my intuition has never been sharper. Life on the street is a short and dangerous game, and no player is your friend. Tommy, a prep from the burbs flashing a bit too much cash for his own good, just met an enemy. A guy in baggy camouflage and a red Chicago Bulls cap selling him a Glad bag full of enough blow to rocket him to another dimension. If he keeps his cool then maybe he gets back in his dad's BMW and lives to grow his first mustache. But my guess is no, not quite. Tonight he dies. Tonight I hope he dies.

Because I got plans.

My partner nudges me. He was only a beat cop six months before transferring to narcotics. I asked our sergeant to assign him to me. I don't usually mind rookies—which delights the other two guys in our unit, who consider rookies about as trustworthy as a woman with a credit card—because they're gullible. Funny things

about fresh-faced rooks from the academy and their open minds: you can dump a lot of shit into them.

"Look at that kid, Eddie," he says to me, shifting in his chair. He does this thing with his palms, rubbing them against his lap nervously. "Looks scared."

Sometimes I wish my partner wouldn't talk. He's that type of cop trying to grow eyes in the back of his head, but usually ends up looking lost all the time. He tries to reason things out when instinct is really all survival is about.

"He ought to," I tell Jerry. "He's an idiot."

Jerry Carmody scowls. He doesn't like me much, but that's because I'm an asshole to anyone who breaks my concentration when I'm observing a set. I like to watch the set develop, see the players and who's got the stash, who the moneymen are, the steerers, the managers, all the shit a good cop keeps track of. From our position across the street in this vacant third-floor apartment we can see it all go down, like viewing the cancerous cells of an organism destroying itself from within.

"You're a regular Michael Landon," says Jerry. "An angel. Have you got your wings yet?"

"Shut up."

His face turns a deep scarlet. Embarrassed, he turns back to the drug deal. You could say this operation isn't going in the books. The other two guys are in on it. Jerry has no idea. Yet.

A minute of rare, Jerry-less silence goes by before he asks, "What do you think they're talking about down there?"

"How the hell should I know?"

That buys another two minutes of indignant silence.

Then my walkie-talkie crackles. "Any action yet, Eddie?" Henry McMahon's voice from the catch car, a black, unmarked van one block away.

"Kid's making the buy now. The players are anxious. Lots of movement."

A static pause, then McMahon's hopeful voice. "Is it potential?"

"Affirmative," I answer, trusting my intuition. "I think we'll have ourselves an offering."

Suddenly Jerry grabs my sleeve and gasps.

A gun is pulled. The player must have made the kid for an undercover cop. Sometimes these dealers are jumpy; getting pinched is a regular routine for them, but too much of a reputation for sloppy dealing and suppliers turn scarce. Something the kid said must have spooked him. Exactly what I was counting on.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Jerry tense up and look at me. I wait a moment before contacting the catch car.

"Jesus, Eddie, I think he's gonna shoot him! Tell McMahon and Trapane to get in there, do it Eddie, do it before—"

In one swift motion I have the rookie on the floor.

Jerry flails against me, glances a few punches off my shoulder, but I'm a damn sight heavier and stronger, compliments of college football and wrestling. In seconds I have his scrawny arms pinned behind his body, his pimply face pressed against the floor. Whiny little noises chirp from his throat.

"You're gonna shut up and listen to me, Jerry. You're gonna be a good boy and do what I say, because I'm going to save you. Are you going to stop fighting me now? There are things you need to understand so these operations go smoothly."

Jerry wriggles his head, which I take for a nod.

I release him. He rolls over on his back and glares up at me like I'm a few bullets shy of a clip. I ignore him for now and watch the junkie teenager I've busted twice in the last month for possession tremble, pale and sweaty, as the gun is thrust into his face.

C'mon, I think, *pull the trigger, you worthless scumbag. Do the kid a favor*.

Glancing around and waving his crew off, scattering them in four different directions, the player utters something inaudible that makes Tommy scream and turn to run, but the gun goes off. The bullet exits the boy's chest in a spray of blood, and his body crumples to the ground, shuddering in pain and shock, before finally resting in peace.

Jerry is about to faint.

"Y-you let it happen," he stammers, "l-let the kid die, didn't try to stop it!"

"McMahon," I say into the walkie-talkie, ignoring Jerry. "hit the set. Man down."

After a moment the cavalry roars down the street.

"Let's go, Jerry." Jerry looks about the way I feel after a night of binge drinking. "You comin'?"

Slowly he rises from his seat.

Outside on the dark street it's controlled mayhem. A chain reaction of house lights winks on in the

neighborhood. Curious neighbors, afraid to be out at night except when cops are around, line their porches, the sleep still in their hair and eyes.

Then a crowd of the most pathetic sorry-asses I've seen in a while flee the drug house where the murder has occurred. This includes a young black woman hauling a screaming toddler in her arms, and a Hispanic male so cracked-out his bloodshot eyes look like they're on the brink of exploding from his bearded face. They scamper away down the sidewalk, glancing back in puzzlement as we huddle close around the body of Tommy Ferguson, which lies in a puddle of blood and diarrhea, and let them escape. They don't interest us tonight, though I'd love five minutes alone in a windowless room with that mother for bringing a child into a hell like this.

But there are other matters far more urgent to attend to first.

"Are the ambulances coming?" Jerry asks, surveying the empty street for flashing lights. "Want me to start canvassing, Eddie?" He's doing that thing with his palms.

"Negative on both."

He looks quizzically at me.

"There's going to be a slight breach of protocol tonight."

I nod to one of the men, Stevie Trapane, a short stocky guy with broad shoulders and close-cropped black hair. He wears a scowl as dutifully as his badge every day, and is as loyal as they come. He, along with McMahon, grab a hold of Tommy around the shoulders and ankles and load him into the van.

Jerry draws me aside. "What the hell is going on, Eddie?"

"We'll tell you all about it on the way."

"I want to know now, or I'm reporting this to the lieutenant."

"Jesus Christ," McMahon says, his eyes rolling in frustration. He grabs the rookie by the back of his already sore neck, spins him around and jams him up against the van. The neighbors watch impassively. "Whatchoo wanna do is ride along with us and keep your mouth shut. You want to be a part of us 'cause we survive the streets, kid, and we'll show you how." Every other word from McMahon's mouth is punctuated with a shard of spittle.

Jimmy slams the van door shut.

I flinch at the sound. There's finality to it, like the lid of a coffin dropping. We all look at each other for signs of weakness in our eyes. Sure, we've done this before, at least a dozen times, but every now and then a man goes loopy and his conscience comes crashing down on him like an anvil, and maybe his faith in what he's doing starts to fade.

Some guys can handle what we wade through serving the public. The morass of society—it's more wretched than they depict on TV. Like the time I found an abandoned baby roasting in an oven, shriveled and leathery. Or discovering in the attic of a house on Joseph Avenue a man and woman tied and gunned down execution style, their genitals sliced off and soaked in blood in a cake pan beside their mutilated bodies. Why I risk my ass I'll never know.

Then other guys see something unexplainable—something that breaks the barriers a cop puts up around his job, so when he goes home to his wife and kids he's not a confused and sobbing wretch like the perps he busts all day—and it festers in their psyche like a sliver under the skin. You live long enough, seen what I've seen, watch die what I've watched die, and you're bound to realize that evil flows deeper in the world than we ever imagined. Deeper than they ever taught us in Sunday school. Deeper than even our priests and philosophers could begin to understand.

What I saw in a crack house during a routine raid three years ago fits that description. Sometimes it steals into my sleep, and I wake up screaming and crying as though my mind is trying to flush the memory out before it corrupts me morally. But it's too late for that; too late to go back to the delusion that a little faith puts everything right again.

McMahon pulls Jerry off the van, a little kinder now. The rook's scared, like they always are, and no one can blame him. He wants to be a good cop, save the world like he promised his mother before he joined the academy, and can't understand heisting a body from a crime scene.

"Let's go," I say, and solemnly we pile into the van. My sunny disposition and limitless empathy get me elected to sit in the back with the rook. The boys get a laugh out of this; even Jerry smiles absent-mindedly despite himself. McMahon climbs into the passenger seat and Stevie roars the engine to life.

"Next stop, the Twilight Zone," Stevie jokes as he

steers us onto some light traffic on East Avenue.

"Ever watch somebody die before, kid?" McMahon wants to know.

Jerry stares at the body on the floor between us as though he expects it to whisper an answer to him.

"Guess that's a no," I say. Jerry just keeps staring down. Then he starts in with the palms again.

"Eddie, you tell the kid about this place?" asks Jimmy.

"Not yet."

"Well, my black ass ain't goin' near that house," says McMahon, turning away from us, shame-faced.

Big bad McMahon. Took a bullet in the leg during his tour in Desert Storm, really fought the towels off those goddamn Iraqis to hear him tell it, and now he's shivering at the thought of a drug house. It was only last year McMahon joined our exclusive ranks and made his first rookie offering, so I can cut him a little slack.

"What do we, uh, do with it?" Jerry points at the body.

"Not we, kid. *You*."

"I don't follow."

"You feed the beast," I explain, getting right up in his face. "You take that corpse there, you carry it through the doors, set it down in the foyer, and run like hell when you see it coming."

"It?"

Darkness seeps into his face. His hands stop rubbing. I stare at him to let him know I think he should listen, he's not getting the business here. "I lost a partner three years ago because he froze, Jerry, because he refused

to believe what he saw. This thing doesn't give you a chance to interview it, but it does give immunity to death. Ain't that right, Jimmy?"

Jimmy holds up three fingers. Then lowers two so he can flip the middle one off at a jay-walker.

"That's three times Jimmy took a bullet and survived," I say.

"Yeah," McMahon laughs, "all of them in the ass and just flesh wounds. Point-blank range."

Jerry shakes his head. "I got a wife, and a baby on the way, guys. I can't play around here. Seriously, get me out of here. My shift is over. I thought narcotics was about busting scum. It's what I've wanted to do since I was a kid, when my old man was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got capped in the head by a dealer. Eddie, tell them to let me go."

I tell them nothing of the sort.

"We're here," Jimmy announces a minute later. The van lurches to a stop at the corner of Lexington and Third.

I look at the rook. "Time's up, kid. Get out of the van."

The palms rev up. "No."

"Get out of the fucking van!"

Jerry strains to see the dark house through the windshield.

"No way." Sweat's oozing down his forehead.

"I'll come back there and get you," McMahon threatens.

"I don't care. This game's over." His right hand drops to the .38 holstered on his hip, where it probably

waits for the command from his brain to take out three crazy cops.

"You think this is a game?" I whip out my own peacemaker, a hefty .44 Magnum, and stick it in his face. Jerry's eyes cross as they stare down the barrel. "I could kill you right now if I wanted to, but I can't kill them!"

I swing the gun over to McMahon, disengage the safety, cock the hammer back and fire. Three clicks. Three misfires.

Not a flinch out of McMahon.

"You see, kid," I say, "you can have that immunity, too. I don't know how it works, and frankly I could give a doggy dick how it works. But you feed a body to that house, kinda like depositing a quarter into a juke, and you get back instant immortality." My laugh sounds slightly maniacal. To my ears at least. "It's that simple. Now get out of the van."

I watch him finger his piece a little longer, and then to my relief decide to open the door and step out of the van.

We all stand together, staring up at the house. We're so alone out here it feels like the dark side of the moon. Nobody ever goes near this house. Nobody would ever want to. On the outside its depressed Victorian architecture is typical for the run-down neighborhood. Dilapidated and unceremoniously boarded up, paint peels and weeds grow unchecked in the yard. But on the inside it's blacker than Hell.

"Better hurry." I can feel my skin crawl, as though a cold finger caresses it. That's its eyes skimming over

you, peering through the cracks in the walls. "It's watching."

Jerry searches the other guys' faces, pleading with those terrified baby blues of his, but we're a hard crew with a short supply of mercy. It's not that I hate Jerry and want to see him harmed in any way, but some obligations surpass duty. We watch as the rookie wraps the body in a blanket so the blood doesn't soak his jacket, and then hoist it over his shoulder. He starts up the weed-choked walk. At least we don't have to worry about witnesses, as the neighbors are already safely barricaded behind locked doors for the night.

"Dump it and run!" I cry, a sharp guilt gnawing my belly.

He hurries. The body bounces with each stride as blood leaks out from under the blanket. It leaves an undulating trail on the cement slabs of the walk.

He hesitates at the porch, and then takes each creaky step slowly and deliberately as if testing the weight they can bear. He has no way of knowing what's coming next. Like I was saying before about open minds—his was stuffed full of notions about monsters that ate decomposing bodies. Most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

The thing in the house on Lexington and Third *is* evil, make no mistake. I was scouring the house during a raid for drugs and weapons when I heard my partner scream. At least it started off as a scream, but quickly turned into a strangled gurgle. I flew down the basement stairs, a few of the uniforms behind me, and found myself in darkness so thick I could have jabbed it with a finger

and watched it ooze. My heart flailing, I saw what remained of my partner, a rookie cop named Cliff Barton. I couldn't call it a man anymore, but a coroner's nightmare. In the dim light at my back I saw his hand quivering, saw his blood-flecked fingers opening and closing as if inviting me into the dark with him. The arm had been brutally ripped off his body. His head was detached, lying next to his legs, a runny trail of blood and mucous wetting the lips. I switched on my flashlight and waved it about me, foolishly hoping like one does when cold fear is pumping through his veins that a little light would scare off an attacker.

Then something crawled out of the shadows from behind the furnace. I can only describe it, loosely, as a cross between a cockroach and a spider, a thing that made some throaty noises and smelled of a bad chemical reaction with sulfur. I watched it—black and oily and sleek—belly up to Eddie's body and slump over it, and sear his flesh with some noxious acid. In moments only a stain and a few odd bits of bone were left on the concrete floor. And a steaming splatter of my own vomit.

As I stood there staring at the stain and wiping my mouth, a shot fired from somewhere in the house. I turned and raced up the stairs, and in the kitchen discovered a crack head wielding a semi-automatic. Startled by the sudden appearance of four more cops, he started spraying bullets at all of us. We were only grazed or missed completely. Impossible, you say? That's what I used to think.

I knew immediately what I had to do. For it to not leave the confines of the basement and contaminate the

rest of the city, it needed fresh meat. When a rookie winds up missing, the media call it job pressure.

The boys and I call it *civic duty*.

The three of us, McMahon, Jimmy, and I are just cells in an organism, fending off a cancer so the disease won't spread to the rest of the body.

After Jerry Carmody's screams fade into the night, I will tell myself he didn't die in vain. Maybe his wife will believe it.

Maybe someday I will, too.

THEY'RE AMONG US

Grey exited the convenience store, a cup of black coffee in one hand and a bottle of antacids in the other. He spotted the hitchhiker across the street leaning against a sign post, his thumb jutted out into the cool desert air. His boots and jeans were coated with dust, his brown leather jacket faded and torn. Judging by the patchy beard on his sunburned face and disheveled hair, the man had been on the road a long time. A worn burlap satchel lay on the ground at his feet.

Grey kept an eye on the hitchhiker as he made his way to his car. He set his coffee on the roof and fished out his keys, aware of the man's stare boring into his back.

You had to be careful with his sort, he thought. They were often desperate, down on their luck, willing to do whatever it took to get what they needed. They robbed, and sometimes even murdered. He'd seen it before in the news many times. People on the fringes of society. Adrift and homeless. They made great feature stories.

Except in this case, no one in the media was ever going to hear about this man. At least, that was Grey's assignment.

As Grey started up the car, he reflected on what he knew so far about the hitchhiker. His dossier sat on the seat beside Grey, but it was thin compared to his past targets, probably because of his age. He picked it up and scanned it one more time. Evan Manuel, nickname "Mann," 23 years old. Born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut. Both parents dead from a car accident four years ago. One sibling, Katherine, residing in Spokane, Washington. Former graduate student at UC Berkeley, majoring in physics. Mann collaborated two years ago with an associate professor on an article published in Popular Science on anti-gravity research and aeronautical engineering.

A copy of the magazine was in the dossier. Grey studied the artist's depiction of a flying machine utilizing said anti-gravity engineering. A saucer-shaped object, approximately 20 meters in diameter, hovering in mid-air over the fifty yard line of a football field. Grey shook his head and sighed. Incredible, the lengths to which human beings will go to try to reach the stars.

Grey sipped his coffee and switched on the CD player. Mozart's *Symphony No. 40 in G-minor* filled the compartment, helping him to relax. This was never easy for him. He didn't think he'd ever get used to doing this job, or to the guilt that often followed. Sometimes the targets he apprehended didn't deserve "reprocessing," in his opinion, but the misidentified ones were few and far between. Or so he was told. He believed his superiors without question when they said the targets were a threat to the cause, but the doubts were always there, eating away at him. In the end, it was better to just bite his

tongue and do his job. Who was he to decide men's fates? He was just one of a vast number of agents working covertly in America for a mission he believed in, even though he was kept in the dark about the details. And the less people knew—especially agents like himself—the better.

Grey stole a quick glance in the direction of the hitchhiker. What was Mann doing out here in the middle of nowhere? According to the dossier, he had no relatives or connections of any sort in Nevada. The file mentioned that Mann had been working on his doctoral thesis when a conflict occurred and he was expelled from the program. Details were sketchy, but Grey had a hunch what was at the heart of the dispute.

The hitchhiker had turned away and was sitting on the guard rail with a sign held up in his lap. Grey put the car into reverse. It was time to get moving—his superiors at The Facility always expected timely arrival of the targets.

Grey steered away from the convenience store and rolled up next to the hitchhiker. As he pulled up alongside the man, he read the tattered cardboard sign propped up against the hitchhiker's chest: *Former Vet. Need a ride. God Bless!* He lowered the window. The evening air spilled into the car, spiced with juniper and sage.

"Where you headed?" he asked amiably, rubbing his watery eyes. He loved the scent of the desert, but he was sensitive to all its irritants. Perhaps he'd be more amenable to a Northern clime. For his next assignment, maybe he'd put in for New York or Maine.

"Gulf Breeze, Florida," answered the eager stranger, blowing on his hands.

"I'm headed south."

"South suits me just fine."

"Florida is east."

The hitchhiker smiled. "Thanks for the geography lesson. But anywhere, frankly, is better than Rachel, Nevada."

Grey examined him closely. No bulges in the pockets of his jacket or jeans to suggest a hidden gun. It was possible a knife could be tucked away on his person somewhere. He supposed it was a chance he would have to take.

"Get in," said Grey, unlocking the passenger door.

The hitchhiker plunged into the car, placing his sign in the backseat and his satchel on the floor between his feet with a heavy thud.

"Where'd you serve?" asked Grey.

"Excuse me?"

"Your sign. It says, 'former vet.' Were you in Iraq?"

Mann smiled again, sheepishly. "Actually, I've never been out of the states, though my dad used to be in the navy. People tend to be a little more sympathetic toward down-on-their-luck soldiers."

"Hell of a way to go through life, lying to people."

"I don't consider it lying," answered the hitchhiker. "I think of it as truth augmentation."

"You got a way with words, kid." Grey signaled and maneuvered the Toyota back onto the road, gunning the engine to put some distance between them and the

small Nevada town. The sooner he put the potential witnesses behind him, the better. Grey scanned the darkening sky. The mesas in the west were tinged with saffron and pink.

"My name's Mann," the hitchhiker said, offering his hand. "At least that's what my friends call me."

"Are we friends?"

Mann laughed. "Friends or enemies, as long as I can get a ride, I don't care which."

Grey turned that response over in his head. "Be careful what you wish for. There are lots of crazies out there." When several seconds passed and it became obvious Mann wasn't going to respond, he added, "I'm Grey," and shook the hitchhiker's surprisingly strong hand. "I don't normally do this, you know."

"Do what?" Mann asked. "Help people?"

Grey gave him a sidelong glance. "Funny. I mean pick up hitchhikers."

"Oh." Mann shifted in his seat. He was taller than Grey at first thought, taller than he looked sitting on the guard rail back by the side of the road. And bigger. A real large man, actually, with a powerful build, whose physical presence made Grey squirm a bit. This target might require a great deal of restraint to reprocess.

"I'm glad I could be your first," said Mann, grinning.

"How do you know I haven't picked up hitchhikers before?"

"You're sweating."

Grey mentally cursed himself for showing such obvious discomfort. Mann might be keying in on it right

now, waiting for a moment of vulnerability to strike. Would he do it in a moving car? Risk his life like that? Grey pressed the gas down a little more, getting the speedometer up to seventy. He was speeding, and normally he didn't do such a thing to attract unwanted attention to himself, but he hoped it would ward off any attack by Mann. Would the stranger be so foolish as to attack Grey now, and send the car careening off the road? He knew his thoughts were irrational, but he couldn't help himself. He didn't know Mann yet. He needed to study him further.

"What's in your backpack there?" he asked, changing the subject. "Sounds like you're carrying a set of encyclopedias in there."

"Close," said Mann, touching the bag protectively. "They're my textbooks."

"Textbooks?"

"Yeah," he said, "at least most of them. And my doctoral thesis. During my defense, the bastards actually laughed at me. So I dropped out of the program. That's why I'm here."

"What are you studying to be?"

Mann didn't answer at first. Grey almost thought he didn't hear the question. When he opened his mouth to repeat it, Mann spoke. "Originally I wanted to teach physics. But then one of my professors showed me a top secret military document he obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, and I became suspicious."

"Of what?"

"That we're not alone."

Grey coughed. He hadn't meant to, but the

irritation in his throat from the dry desert air bothered him. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something. He'd been out in the field a long time, without a single day off, for many months now. Time was short, and the work taking place in The Facility was near completion. The moment for human reckoning was almost at hand.

Grey took a long swallow of coffee, grimaced as it burned its way down. "I see," he said, reaching for the antacids. "And who do you suppose is among us?"

Mann turned to stare at Grey. In the dim and eerie glow of the dashboard, Mann's expression was inscrutable. "Who do you think? Aliens."

"Aliens. You mean, like, Mexicans or something?"

"Something."

Grey nodded, crunching the Tums and taking a sip of coffee to wash the chalky fruit flavor out of his mouth. "And now you don't want to be a teacher anymore."

"There's a bigger story that needs to be told."

"And you're the one to do it."

Mann shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Grey admired the pluck of this young kid, but hated to see anyone so young throw his future away on such a crazy notion.

"What's your next move then?" he asked.

"I've registered for a metaphysical course online. I'm going to get my Ph.D. in ufology."

"You mean, like a guy who—?"

"Yeah, studies UFOs."

"I see," Grey sighed.

"Most people think it's a dumb idea. I wanted to start a certification program at Berkeley, but my professors laughed at me. They said the university would never certify a ufology program, because it wasn't a legitimate science. No credible evidence, they said. But they're wrong. I have reams of it, most of which the public has never seen before."

Grey lingered over that point as he took another swig of coffee. His stomach churned. Why did he keep drinking this stuff? He supposed because the targets always did. "Most people also claim to have seen UFOs before," he said. "So what does that say about them?"

"You don't believe."

"I didn't say that; I said most people claim to have seen them. I'm just a skeptic."

"So was I until ..." Mann fell silent and turned away.

"Until what?" Grey urged. "Little green men abducted you?"

The dying embers of sunlight in the west cast long blue shadows over the desert sands. "It was a long time ago," Mann began slowly. "I was only a kid, maybe seven or eight, when I saw them up in the sky. The lights. They formed a pattern, like a series of triangles arranged in a circular shape, and they coasted across the night sky in complete silence, without a hum or the faintest whine of a mechanical engine. Just the lights, moving with the careless ease of a dream.

"I started jumping up and down like a lunatic, waving at them, calling out to them. Then ... I must have blacked out. I experienced a time loss of almost an hour.

The next thing I remember, my father was carrying me into the house and my mother was hysterically talking to someone on the phone. I think she was calling for a doctor. They told me later they found me in the middle of the field behind our backyard. My jacket and sweater were missing, and I had strange cuts all over my chest and neck. I couldn't remember a thing, just seeing the lights one second, and my father the next."

"You were seven," pointed out Grey. "You couldn't possibly have known what you were looking at. It could have been weather phenomenon of some sort, or a strange military flight pattern."

"We lived in Connecticut," Mann explained. "The only major military base was New London Naval Submarine Base in Groton, and I'm pretty sure they weren't experimenting with any alien hardware there. And how do you explain the blackout?"

"Again, you were a kid. You probably fell asleep."

"In the middle of a snowy field?"

"There are always excuses," Grey muttered.

"What was that?"

"Excuses," Grey repeated. "You people are all the same. What more do you want? In 1952, the government gave you Project Blue Book, investigated thousands of sightings to pacify the public that there were no fleets of spaceships invading Earth, but still you don't believe."

"Project Blue Book was a sham. Most of the Air Force officers and scientists on the commission were skeptics. They investigated only the cases they wanted to, interviewed only a small handful of people each time, and

ignored any hard evidence that didn't conveniently fit their theories."

"What did you want them to do?"

"Finish investigating the seven hundred cases that they left classified as 'unidentified' and come clean to the public."

"The government is always at fault."

"They government's been lying to us since at least 1947, when the saucer crashed at Roswell."

"Here we go. You think there's a secret underground bunker somewhere with little green men in it."

"There are too many inconsistencies in the government's own account of events back then, too many abrupt story changes about the nature of the debris found at the crash site. The rancher who first appeared on the scene, William Brazel, told the local media that the wreckage couldn't have come from an earthly craft—the material was too strange and alien. They couldn't burn it, tear it, or cut it. Then he suddenly changes his story, literally the next day, and says he made a mistake and it was nothing more than a weather balloon.

"Same thing happened in 2006 at Chicago's O'Hare airport. A huge disc-shaped object hovered over runways, frozen and in complete silence, for quite a while before suddenly launching straight up and disappearing. It punched a hole in the clouds so large you could see the blue sky through it. The FAA at first refused to acknowledge the object, then later backtracked and said they had received reports on it from pilots and other

credible employees. It all points to a military and government cover up."

"And where are the videos and pictures? Everybody has a cell phone camera nowadays. Why didn't we hear anybody talking about it in the news?"

"The government won't let the media talk about it. The FAA has a strict policy of silence on such matters. Pilots and others who work for the airlines could lose their jobs if they broke their silence and told what they saw."

"Sounds too convenient."

"You're a cynic."

"Call me a realist. I prefer facts over conspiracy theories."

"I've just told you some facts."

Grey frowned. "What you've told me is a pieced-together fantasy. Is this the way they teach you to critically analyze evidence in this *metaphysical* course you're taking?"

"I respect your views," said Mann, folding his arms, "even if you don't respect mine."

But Grey didn't back down. "You're nuts," he scoffed, but bit back the rest of his words.

"Like I said before," Mann answered mildly, "I'm used to being insulted."

They drove on in silence, Grey gritting his teeth and Mann calmly watching the unbroken miles of desert roll by. Mozart's *Requiem in D-Minor* came on. Grey especially liked this piece, found it *apropos* to his line of work.

"So what's in Gulf Breeze?" he asked after several

minutes had passed.

Mann looked up. "Hmm? Oh, I'm going to a convention."

"You bring a costume?"

"You know, you're a real funny guy. No, I didn't bring a costume. Some of the brightest minds in ufology and astronomy—including J. Allen Hynek, an astronomer who turned into a believer after working on Project Blue Book, and a former Lockheed Martin senior engineer named Neil Davis—are going to be speaking there."

"What are they going to be presenting?"

"The latest theories on UFO-government collusion."

"Well," sighed Grey, feeling renewed irritation, "given the lack of hard evidence, it should make for a short afternoon."

"Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Grey smiled. This kid had an answer for everything.

"And besides," Mann went on, "there's plenty of proof out there. May I?"

"Go ahead."

Mann switched on the overhead dome light. Then hauled up onto his lap the satchel and unfastened its straps. He rooted around inside and then pulled out a thick black hardcover book with a glossy cover. The bold words, THE UFO PHENOMENON, were printed in white on the cover and accompanied by a grainy photograph of a sombrero-shaped flying object.

Grey squinted at the cover. "You write that book?"

"I wish!" Mann chuckled. "Maybe someday I'll write a book."

"Oh yeah?" Grey turned his attention back to the road. "What could you possibly have to say that hasn't been said already in about a thousand blogs on the Internet?"

"The secret to why they're among us."

Grey felt a disquieting sensation pass through his body. *I'm letting this one get to me and I don't know why.* He waited for his discomfort to pass before he said, "And what would that be?"

"Let me explain." Mann flipped rapidly through the pages of the book. "There's been evidence of UFOs since ancient times. Look at this." He held the book open for Grey to see. A squat, clay sculpture of a person with a widely shaped head and large, oblong eyes stared out from the book. The caption explained that the sculpture's origins could be traced to a pre-Japanese culture. On the next page was a Colombian artifact, centuries old, that resembled a winged aircraft.

"This one is interesting," Mann said, pointing to a figure in what looked like a long red robe, with a red halo around its head. "It was found in a cave in Australia. Carbon dating verifies its thousands of years old. Look at the eyes, how large and narrow they look. The halo is quite likely a helmet or some kind of head gear. Why would aborigines have painted such an alien-looking image unless they had knowledge of such a being?"

"You're assuming, of course, that ancient man had no imagination or creativity. They worshiped gods of all sorts, and those gods came in many forms."

"But why do so many artifacts and paintings from ancient cultures all over the world bear such close resemblance? They all seem to portray the same basic alien form. Are you suggesting it's merely coincidence?"

Grey scoffed. "I don't believe in coincidence. However, I do believe in confirmation bias. You people see aliens in your corn flakes. When you're looking for something long enough and hard enough, you're bound to find proof of it, whether it's there or not."

"I won't argue that," said Mann. "But how do you explain art work like this?"

He turned to another page and showed Grey *The Madonna with Saint Giovannino* by Domenico Ghirlandaio. In the foreground, Mary is kneeling in prayer while a cherub cradles baby Jesus on the ground. Behind Mary, hovering above the skyline is a black UFO-type object. A man in the background appears to be gazing up at the strange craft.

"I don't see the big deal," said Grey.

"Why would an artist from six hundred years ago paint any object in the sky like that? There are no records of any aerial craft back then. If you look closely, you see it even radiates yellow beams of light.

"This one here shows another scene from the life of the Virgin Mary, on a medieval tapestry. What does that look like to you there?" Mann pointed to the upper left corner of the picture, to a black domed object in the sky.

"We have no idea why the artists chose to include such esoteric detail," admitted Grey, "but that doesn't mean it's extraterrestrial in origin."

"Why won't you even consider the possibility?"

"Why should I?" he demanded. "Listen, you're engaging in *a priori* reasoning like the intelligent-design crowd. If the facts seem to be beyond comprehension, like the complicated design of the human eye, then you attribute some divine, or in this case *other-worldly*, theory to them."

"UFOs are always present at all the major events in human history. They've been watching us for millennia. Here, take a look at this." Mann dug around in his satchel and pulled out a tattered manila file folder. "I have documents here that you won't believe, and not a single one is redacted. Transcripts of high-ranking witness testimony on UFO sightings at ICBM and nuclear weapons storage facilities around the country. Globally, sightings have increased a hundred fold since 1948, or put another way, since around the start of the Cold War.

"In 1967, an incident occurred at Malmstrom Air Force base in Montana. A former USAF Minuteman ICBM Commander named Robert J. Albright testified before a secret congressional hearing that eight Minuteman ICBMs suddenly and for no reason shut down after officially denied reports of a UFO passed overhead. According to Commander Albright's testimony, however, Air Force Security Police witnessed the event and reported it directly to him. What I find most compelling is the fact there was a protocol in the first place when a UFO was spotted over their missile field."

Mann leafed through the papers some more. "Well-documented sightings have occurred dozens of

other times, at weapons development and manufacturing sites and fuel processing facilities. In July of 1945, six F-6 fighter planes were scrambled to an object the size of three aircraft carriers side by side, but had to fall back after they'd climbed to an altitude of 42,000 feet. The object, described in the pilots' reports as 'very streamlined like a stretched-out egg and pinkish in color,' shot away and disappeared as quickly as it came."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Grey asked.

"Because it proves what I've felt all along—what I and many others *know* to be true. That aliens are observing us, for now, and when the time comes ... they'll help."

"Help with what?"

Mann took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "You'll think it sounds crazy, but it's probably already too late for that.

"You got that right."

"I think they know what's going to happen in the future, and it has something to do with our current energy policies and political crises. When the nuclear power plant in Fukushima melted down after the earthquake earlier this year, unsubstantiated reports came out of a UFO hovering in the skies just prior to and immediately after the accident. Videos have been surfacing on You Tube for months now."

"Then why don't they help? Why do they just watch all the time, doing nothing? Scotty could've beamed the radioactive waste into deep space a long time ago."

"They don't work that way. They want to see if we can help ourselves first, and if that doesn't work, they're going to intervene. They're way too advanced to just watch us die. They'll show us how to cultivate renewable energy sources rather than rely on nuclear and carbon-based materials. It'll change the world, and end all wars."

"Sounds nice." Grey finished off the rest of his coffee, grimaced, and chewed two more antacids.

"You know," said Mann, looking at him funny, "most people don't eat Tums and coffee at the same time."

"I know." Grey slowed the car down and pulled over to the side of the road. "But the coffee you people make is corrosive to my digestive tract."

Mann looked around. "Why are we stopping here? Something wrong?"

"This is the end of the line for you, kid." Grey brought the car to a stop.

"What do you mean?"

"I have to go to work now."

Confused, Mann stared out at the darkness and the vast empty desert. "We're in the middle of nowhere."

"See the road over there?" Grey turned on his brights. A narrow strip of gravel ribboned off into the dark. A stark wooden sign with bold red and black print stood next to it:

WARNING
RESTRICTED AREA
NO TRESPASSING BEYOND THIS POINT
PHOTOGRAPHY IS PROHIBITED

"What's down there?" Mann asked, straining to see.

"You don't know? Come on."

Mann licked his lips and thought for a moment. "This can't be—"

"It is."

"Area 51?" His eyes widened in delight.

"We're not there yet, but this is the Extraterrestrial Highway, as close as civilians can get to Area 51 ... at least without getting arrested. You have to hike twenty-six miles up Tikaboo Peak if you want to see the whole lay out of the place."

"You mean you *seriously* work at Area 51?" Mann was staring at him incredulously, shaking his head. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't look the type."

"And what type would that be?"

"I just mean, you don't look like an egghead rocket scientist with a pocket protector and all that."

"The same could be said for you, my friend. I'd have pegged you for a drug addict before a doctoral student."

Mann sniffed and looked away. "Well, it's only a metaphysical degree."

Grey let the heavy silence in the car hang over them as he carefully chose his next words.

"Want to see something you'll never forget? Something that will change your perspective on life?"

"What do you mean? Inside Area 51? It's a classified Military Operating Area. They don't even permit civilian or even military flyovers unless they

originate from there. How can you just bring me into an MOA without permission?"

"I can do whatever I want."

A cloud of fear scudded behind Mann's eyes. "Who are you?"

"Hollywood calls me a 'man in black.'"

"Shut up."

Grey smiled.

"You're kidding me." Mann rubbed his eyes and sighed. "This is incredible. Why didn't you say something before? Why did you let me ramble on about stuff you must already know?"

"You don't know half as much as you think you do"

Mann drummed his fingers nervously on the satchel.

Grey put the car in drive. *This target won't run.* He'll probably beg to go into the reprocessing chamber just so he can claim he was inside Area 51's *sanctum sanctorum*; not that he'll remember anything when he comes out. Everything he knows—his name, his family's faces, and all his personal memories—will be wiped clean. Grey would probably get a promotion for bringing this target in, since he was high on the list to begin with. Still, he thought, he was just a kid. Not a radical who was trying to bring down the government, just a kid with a head full of questions and a quest for answers. There were fewer and fewer like him out there. The truly curious. The reprocessing must be going very, very well.

"It's up here." Grey pointed off to the left. "It's hard to see in the dark, but you can make out the hangar

over there. Some runways, housing facilities, mess halls, and other shelters are located behind the hangar. No windows in any of the buildings, did you know that? Keeps us from being distracted, you see. The whole complex is built over an abandoned silver mine, so the underground tunnels go on for miles. Very handy for our experiments. Hold on." Grey slowed the car down as they approached a guard shack. He lowered the window. A soldier in camouflage with an M-16 rifle slung around his shoulder emerged from the shack, carrying a small device that looked like an iPad. He nodded to Grey, but when he noticed Mann in the passenger seat, his finger flew to the M-16's trigger.

"Who's this, Grey 1328-3?" asked the officer in a stern, clipped voice.

"A friend," replied Grey mildly. He reached out and put his hand gently on the soldier's arm. "Let him through, Grey 1352-4. I'll take responsibility for him."

Though he didn't take his eyes off Mann, the soldier's rigid stance began to relax.

"Is Central Command expecting him?"

Grey flicked his sleeve back and glanced at his watch. "I do believe I'm right on time." He glanced over at Mann. "You want to know the truth? It's inside there, but I think you already have a pretty good idea what you're going to see."

"He can never leave," warned the guard. "You know that, Grey 1328-3."

"What's he talking about?" Mann looked between Grey and the guard. "Why can't I? And why do you keep calling each other Grey?"

"Because we're brothers," Grey answered, looking up at the guard. "Of a sort. Genetically identical material, at least. There are thousands of us living among you, working, watching you, seeing how you progress. As you yourself said, we're waiting. The time of ultimate annihilation for your species is coming. We're trying to help, and uphold the mutually negotiated treaty your world leaders signed with ours."

"What treaty?"

"The one your own President Carter signed in 1978. The one that states, basically, that if you provide us with the raw nuclear material we need to fuel our ships for the long journey home, we'll take as many of you as we can before your world is disintegrated. It means a new start to the human race, on one of our solar system's planets—and a chance for us to go home."

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?"

"We could have done that a long time ago, Evan. But instead we let you go. Gently, if I recall, in that nice little snowy field."

Grey let the thought shield drop between him and Mann, and revealed his true form. Mann's eyes widened in horror and his mouth twisted into a scream. Grey's head morphed into a narrow, elongated teardrop, his eyes huge and black and almond-shaped. They shined moistly and stared straight through Mann, to the dimmest reaches of his soul. A narrow slit of a mouth sat above a bony, tapered chin. He stuck out his hand and tried to grab Mann before he bolted from the car, but Mann slapped away the three slender, lithe fingers. He screamed for help as he fled into the desert. Grey stood up from the

car and watched Mann disappear into the darkness, his desperate pleas fading away on the dying breeze. He exchanged a glance with Grey 1352-4.

"It's regrettable," he said, feeling peculiarly empty without Mann's company.

"What did he believe?"

Grey shook his head. "That we would help earthlings break free from their oppressive and warmongering governments and show them new ways to create renewable energy sources before all the nuclear reactors melted down."

"Interesting. Did he say why we'd do that?"

"We're nice."

Both aliens shared a hearty laugh.

"In a way, I guess we are," said Grey 1352-4, after he wiped the tears from his eyes. By now he'd relaxed his own thought shield and was standing beside Grey in full alien form. "After being around these earthlings for millennia, I've come to see them as brethren. In fact, I've almost gotten used to this bitter drink they call 'coffee.'"

Grey rubbed his gurgling stomach. "We told the Mayans five thousand years ago what was going to happen to the sun, and what that would mean for earth's people. Even after they carved the stone calendar so others would know that December 12, 2012 was the last day, people still didn't believe. Some humans, like Mr. Manuel here, understand, but the rest live in complete denial. Exactly how the governments want it, of course."

"It's always easier to tend a flock of docile sheep."

Grey nodded. "But soon there won't be any flocks left. When the sun's next solar storm starts, the earth's

magnetic field will be ripped away in a matter of seconds. With that much radiation bombarding Earth, the atmosphere will burn away and the oceans evaporate within weeks. Nothing will exist anymore. Earth will be a barren rock, like the moon."

"And if that didn't happen," observed Grey 1352-4, "then in less than a decade they'd blow themselves up in a third world war. This species is particularly thoughtless about the consequences of power."

Both aliens gazed wistfully into the night sky.

"You know we have to send a patrol to pick him up," said the guard. "Central Command is going to be most interested in this target."

"I know. I wish it didn't have to be this way. We've reprocessed far too many of them as it is. And for what? This one in particular wouldn't have mattered all that much to the cause. He was just a kid, after all."

"Only the strong, the rich, and the politically-connected survive. It's that way across the galaxy."

"True," Grey agreed. "But sometimes the strong and the rich are not the best suited to seed a new planet."

"Explain."

"I'm not sure I can. It's just a hunch, as humans say, that maybe we've been saving the wrong ones all along."

"That's for others to decide. We just study them, filter out the troublemakers, and confuse all the rest."

"Confuse?" Grey looked at his friend as a dark feeling settled over him. "I just hope we're not the ones who are confused."

HEAR THEM SCREAM

There was something weighty on Andy's mind tonight. He wore a distracted expression, his eyes vague and dreamy. He held his beer in his lap like an exotic pet as he stared into the woods around us, where his attention hadn't wavered since we got here. Even for a free-spirited guy like Andy, his strange Zen-like behavior disturbed me.

I asked him, "Why so quiet tonight, douche bag?"

By this time on a Friday evening we're usually wrecked out of our minds on Killian's and verbally trashing the world. We're college guys and that's what you do, I guess. Pretend to know everything, act like you hate all of it. But Andy's not even through his second beer yet, which was unusual, since Andy and drinking went together like hookers and bad breath.

When he didn't answer me, I repeated the question, this time adding a crude remark about his mother's blowjob abilities. The only response I got was "Shut up, I'm thinking," and that for sure told me something was wrong.

Andy was staring at an old hiking trail threading through the woods, the sort of trail you saw a million of in a state park like this, shady and buggy and trampled by

herds of families on weekend excursions to capture a little bit of that pioneering spirit. Tonight we were the only ones here. It was getting late in the day, and no one really ventured into this tucked-away section of the park anyway, except other teenagers up to their usual iniquities.

"What's the matter with you, man?" In the two semesters I'd known Andy "Wild Man" Wilder, I'd never seen him so unsettled, unless someone didn't pay up at a keg party or the hockey coach benched him. But this was obviously something a little more troubling. Swiping the long hair out of his face, Andy took a deliberately moody suck on his beer bottle, and finally pried his eyes away from the woods.

"Wanna meet death, Ryan?" He laughed, a jerky, gasping sound like a chronic cough, like he gets when he hits the weed a little too long.

"Love to. Got his number?"

"Seriously." He stood up and pointed through the trees. "There's a body through there, in the ravine. I heard Laura Taylor in my Humanities class talk about it today. She said it was a girl who wandered back alone there at night, stoned out of her mind, and slipped down the sides of the embankment. They said you could hear her tumbling the whole way down, hear her spine crack on the jutting rocks, hear her bones snap. They said her joints made this sick sound, you know, when they were popping out of her skin, like bubble wrap or something."

"You'll believe anything."

"Just listen. They said the body slid over a hundred feet before it hit the bottom. Then all you heard

was moaning. For a little while at least. No screaming at all, not even when she first slipped, not even when the ground started tearing her up. Nothing. I mean, what the hell? How do you die like that, like you're in peace?"

"Slow down, Andy."

"How?" he insisted again, staring at me funny. Now I understood. His question wasn't rhetorical. He wanted to hear about my father. Like a true Buddhist, my friend Andy was apparently after Enlightenment.

So I told him the story. I'd mentioned parts of it to him before, but never the gory details.

My father, you see, liked to drink alone. In classic drunk fashion, he hid bottles all over the house, and would go looking for one like an eager kid hunting Easter eggs whenever the pressures of job or family got to him.

They say he must have had a heart attack and slipped on the stairs, though not even the coroner could tell which happened first. My mother found his drunk ass at the bottom of the basement stairs, crumpled like a discarded marionette, his neck broken so badly his face was down but his chest was up. Bones stuck out of places where bones had no business sticking. Blood ringed the cement floor where his head had struck. The heady mixture of piss and alcohol filled the basement for a full week after.

I must say, I was a ball of confliction when it happened. Just fourteen, too proud to cry, but feeling sorry for the old bastard nonetheless. I couldn't help thinking, What if he hadn't died instantly? What if he was still alive with a broken neck and screaming for help? What would his last thoughts be? Would he be sorry for

anything he'd done? Would he actually say a prayer, think of his family for once, wish he'd done things differently? My mother said he looked at peace when they found him, but I didn't believe her; she was bullshitting me, I just couldn't prove it. She fed me that line of crap because she knew I loved the son of a bitch, despite how he used to knock us around like we were whack-a-moles or something.

I guess when you lose a parent tragically, no matter how tyrannical he may have been, it changes you. That's why I became a psych major in college—I had to find out why death fascinated me so much, and where the mind went at the moment of its own termination. Was it thinking clearly or just shitting itself knowing the body was a goner? Disappointingly, there were very few books on the subject, except speculation. Lots and lots of speculation—near-death experience crap, that sort of thing.

Nothing *experimental*.

And that's what people want. People like Andy. They want answers. They want to know what, if anything, lies in wait for us at the end. Or if we just wink out like tiny flames in a stiff, cold wind.

Hordes of insects hummed around my ears in the settling dusk. "When did this supposedly happen to this poor victim of circumstance?" I asked, swiping at the air.

"What?" Andy looked at me blankly. He was no doubt still visualizing my dead father and wondering how a head could get twisted 180 degrees.

"The girl?" I prompted. "Her fall?"

"Oh," he said, shaking his head. "I don't know."

"Did Laura Taylor tell you where?"

Andy frowned, thought about this. "Maybe a mile, maybe less. They say she walked a long way in, got lost, and then fell. No one knows for sure."

"What are you thinking of doing?"

A breeze tinged with wildflowers and that nose-tickling hint of pollen stirred the air. Andy stared at the trees as if they were whispering directions to him. Then he stood up shakily and lurched forward like a reluctant soldier summoned to duty. As his frat brother I followed him faithfully onto the trail, not wanting to miss a thing.

"I've got to see her face, Ryan."

I thought about why anyone would want to see a dead girl's face—unless you were a horny necrophiliac with a fancy for bug-eaten flesh, and I knew that wasn't Andy's kink—when it dawned on me. Andy had missed a lot of classes this semester. Wasn't going to as many parties, either. Wouldn't answer his cell phone for long stretches of time. Sometimes he wouldn't be around campus or at the frat house for a week, sometimes longer. Nobody ever had any idea where Wild Man had gotten himself off to.

"Something you're not telling me, Andy?"

He stopped walking and put his head down. When he looked up at me, his eyes were hooded with shadows. "I'm dying, Ryan. Found out six months ago, but didn't want to worry anybody. I got cancer. The fuck of it is, I don't feel nothin'. But it's in there, eating away at my organs. I'm not going to make it to Christmas the doctors tell me. Tomorrow I'm leaving school and going home. Good a place as any to die, I guess."

We walked for another ten minutes without saying a word to each other. Then Andy broke the silence when he asked, "How can we be sure death is so peaceful?"

"Who says it is?"

"She wasn't scared."

"Says Laura Taylor. What do you think was going through the poor girl's mind, Andy, when she was dying? Whether she was going to pass Humanities? I doubt it. What about my father? Doesn't it make you wonder? Maybe they think of God, or maybe they fear the sum of their sins will be enough to wash their souls down the sewer to Hell. Personally, I don't believe in Hell. How does God objectively judge anyone fit for Hell when birth itself is like starting an Oliver Stone movie in the middle. So much discord and absurdity that by the time you escape childhood you have no idea what's going on or who anybody really is. Then, after a painfully long purgatory on Earth, comes death, when we finally*--maybe--*start getting some answers. That's why we seek to understand death, why the body in the woods is so intriguing. Why stillness is so loud in our ears. They talk, Andy. All the dead talk."

Andy glanced back at me, his cheeks flushed crimson, an expression of mystification knitting his brows together. I grinned at him to let him know, hey, it's the Killian's talking, but he seemed unconvinced. I could hear the stillness in the woods. I could sense the presence of secrets. Now these same voices whispered to Andy with their pressing desires, and that's why he resumed searching the trail, his unkempt hair swinging side to side

as his head scanned the trail in the rapidly fading light.

"Am I sick, Ryan?" he asked, loaded with desperation.

"You said you had cancer."

"I don't mean physically. Am I sick to be so obsessed with death? Shouldn't I be wanting to spend my last days chasing tail and drinking marguerites in the sunshine?"

"Of course you should, nimrod, but you're after bigger game here. You're after the answer to life itself."

"Meaning?"

"You tell me."

Andy fell silent. Minutes passed as we kept searching the trail when suddenly he let out a whoop of excitement, startling me. He dropped to his knees and clawed around a thick patch of underbrush.

"I think this is the spot," he muttered.

"How can you be sure?"

"It's right here, I know it is."

"How can we know anything, Andy?"

He looked back at me. "Can't you stop the metaphysical mumbo jumbo for one minute and help me dig?"

Leaning forward, he pointed out to me some crushed weeds and foliage. We dug through them and then he stuck his head over to look down at the blackness oiling the bottom of the ravine. He unclipped his flashlight and shined the beam down there. "Looks like something big might've gone through here," he said breathlessly. "You know, something's been troubling me all night, Ryan. How do you suppose Laura knew how the

girl died if she was alone on the trail?"

"Because she heard it from me." I kicked the poor bastard hard on the ass, with plenty of force and leverage to send him tumbling over the edge. There's a lot of screaming, let me tell you, when death catches us by surprise. We fight to the very twisted end, dying hard, clinging to life. I was pleased, having this chance to share in my friend's horror, to listen to his divine cursing. These little experiences reveal more of the wracked mind than any theory put forth yet. The mind has a fascinating tendency to purge itself of all its nasty little secrets, and sometimes I've been lucky enough to catch a few confessions floating skyward to the Maker's ears. Intense. I loved Andy all the more just then because he was pure now, his soul purged of sin, his heart abundantly lighter.

Perhaps I may have helped him get to a better place, and if so, I'm proud. Proud to do my part, proud to record these intense experiences for my senior thesis that may help other lost souls in their search for life's meaning; souls like Andy's, whose long and harrowing wait for death is over.

ALL THE LITTLE SINNERS

I.

You gotta come out here, Nick," gasped Tommy when I opened the front door. "Something's happened."

Tommy Beckwith stood panic-stricken and shivering on my doorstep. His uneven patches of beard looked like a lawn with a bad infestation, and oily blond hair hung in bedraggled locks across his tall forehead. Despite the stifling heat, my blood turned to ice when I noticed the terror in Tommy's eyes.

"What happened?" I said.

"Just come see."

"Damn." I gulped the last few swallows of my breakfast and threw the beer can away. "What did you do now?"

I followed him out to his car, an old wreck of a Toyota. Jumping from foot to foot like he had to take a piss, Tommy dug in his pocket for the keys and unlocked the trunk. It swung open, and with it came a foul stench that seared right up into my brain.

"Take a look," he said, his voice cracking.

I looked. But I wish I never did. I wished I'd listened to my mother, God rest her soul, when she told me a long time ago to put tracks between me and Tommy. She was right; Tommy was a bad seed. And a friendship with him had only one outcome: disaster, pure and simple.

"Tommy," I said slowly, "is that who I think it is?"

"Promise you won't get mad." He always chewed his thumbnail down to the quick, but today he was really going to town on it. Blood leaked around the edges.

I stared into Tommy's car, cursing how it all began. One afternoon. One mistake. So many years ago. A sickly chill spread through me, like the spores of a virus growing in my blood. One glance at Tommy and his sunken eyes told me the cancer of past sins was eating him up inside, too.

It occurred to me, as it probably did in all men with a hefty list of youthful indiscretions, that I had been deceiving myself. Some consequences really *do* have the legs to catch up to you.

"Spill it, Tommy. What happened here? What the hell did you get yourself into this time?"

He buried his greasy face in his hands, and let loose the waterworks. "Sister Margaret," he said between sobs. "Christ Almighty, *I killed Sister Margaret*!"

My body hardened into a lump of clay, with a heart crawling sluggishly somewhere inside. I couldn't lift my arms. Couldn't even feel my legs. All I could do was stare at the lumpy shape under the blanket, waiting for one of our drinking buddies to pop up with a shit-eating

grin on his face and blurt the joke was on me. But nothing like that happened. The lumpy shape didn't move, didn't stretch, didn't even twitch. It sat still as a pile of dirt. And then it hit me: Tommy had killed someone. No, not just someone—let's be fair here. *Sister Margaret Finch*, our old fifth-grade teacher at the School of the Holy Shepherd, mercenary of God and scourge of children everywhere.

Without thinking, I reached down and slid the blanket off the rest of the body.

Sister Margaret's filmy eyes, purpled from shattered blood vessels, stared past me and up to the hazy sky. Her face was bruised and dented on the left side, the ridge of her nose broken into irregular sections. A fetid stink like garbage left to rot in the sun cloyed to the body, making my eyes water. A few teeth had been knocked out of her mouth, the bloody gaps glistening moistly. A mosquito wove in and out of her teeth before finally sinking its proboscis into her blotchy tongue for a sip of whatever juices still remained inside.

By itself, this was enough to supply me with nightmares for the rest of my days; but what struck me most profoundly were the rosary beads hanging around her neck, the crucifix nestled snugly between her mountainous bosoms.

With my eyes fixated on that crucifix, a thought came over me. What was Sister Margaret doing back here in White Spruce after all these years? Last anyone knew, she had retired early from teaching and beat it out of town. Rumors swirled about her mental health and lost faith. It was a scandalous period for our little community,

which normally had nothing better to talk about than bad weather and white trash babies. Tommy and I knew the truth, however, and we lived with it like a disease you ignore until it's too late to do anything about.

Forgetting all that for now, I stole myself long enough to put two fingers on her waxy neck and check for a pulse. Stupid, I know, but this was Tommy, and I'd have bet my disability checks he didn't think of it. In these matters, you just never know until you know, though judging by the grotesque angles of her arms and legs, there was no way in hell this was turning out well for the good sister.

Tommy, blubbering louder than ever, started grunting like a sow in labor.

"Pull yourself together, *goddamnit*," I said between clenched teeth.

After several deep, shuddering breaths, he finally had himself under control. "W-what are we going to do with ... it?"

"Call an ambulance," I declared. "Call the police, somebody ..."

"No, Nick, not the police!" He grabbed the sleeve of my T-shirt. I had never seen another man so scared before. "Do you know what they'll do to me? It'll be my second felony; I would face serious prison time. I'm already on probation!"

"Then you should have thought of that before you mowed down Sister Margaret!"

"It was an accident, Nick!"

"It always is with you, Tommy."

He grew quiet after that. I knew what he was thinking and, reluctantly, I agreed. We had to ditch the body. Tommy had a problem staying within the boundaries of the law, and if we showed up at the sheriff's doorstep with the bloated carcass of Sister Margaret stinking up the trunk of Tommy's car, he would be back in prison before you could say *Don't drop the soap*.

I sighed, kicked a stone with the heel of my slipper. "All right, we'll figure out something. You royally fucked up this time, worse than—"

"Don't say it, Nick, please." He had the shakes all over. "I can't take it right now. I'll-I'll go crazy."

I backed off, for now. "Let's get her inside."

"Inside?"

"My sister's gonna be by any time now. She checks on me from time to time; thinks I'm an invalid or something. If I'm not here, she'll go all Jane Marple on my ass and try to find out where I was. Gina's like that now, since Anne left. And besides, she's got a nose like a bloodhound, and this body stinks bad. We leave it in here, in this heat, we'll be spooning Sister Margaret out come this afternoon. Now help me get this body down to my basement. I got a storage locker there. The cool air will keep it from reakin' while we figure all this out."

II.

We muscled the body downstairs and set it in the old storage closet where I kept stuff like boxes of old clothes, a few stray pieces of furniture, and the porn collection I never wanted Anne to find. The room was

narrow and not particularly deep, but there was just enough space to shut the door on Sister Margaret. Then we headed back up to the kitchen, where I popped open two Millers and gave one to Tommy. He stared at it oddly for a moment like he'd never seen one before, and then dumped half of it down his gullet in a single gulp. That cancer, that *guilt,* was eating him up fast. I almost didn't recognize my friend anymore.

"Now tell me what happened," I said. "Start from the beginning and tell it slow; I don't want to miss anything."

Tommy cleared his throat and belched. "I was driving down County Road 40 around six-thirty this morning, after I spent the night with Betty, a waitress I started seeing from the diner. I think you know the place, Countryside?"

I nodded. "Anne and me had the pancakes there a time or two."

"Yeah, well, Betty's been working the nightshift since they started staying open twenty-four hours. Last night was the first night she'd had off in over a week. So we, you know, cuddled."

Cuddled? Now I knew my friend was losing his mind. "You never told me about Betty before."

"We haven't seen each other in over a month."

"Heard you were out of town, looking for work."

"Heard you were on a bender."

He had me there. Ever since Anne left me two months ago and took our son Noah with her, I'd been living in my own little world, one I shared with alcohol, a

companion who didn't think unemployed shitkickers like me were beneath its dignity.

"Tell me about this morning," I said, trying to keep us focused on the story. "What happened on County Road 40?"

His eyes drifted over to the window. "There was a fog just come out of nowhere, not like any I'd seen before. It rolled in through my window thick and cold, like the chill of a meat locker. My car started sputtering, like it was choking on the stuff. I drove through a patch of it so thick I couldn't even see the hood of the car. Then, just as it was clearing away and I could see a little sun, I felt a jolt under my wheels.

"I stopped the car and got out to look. I thought I might've hit a coon or a possum or somethin', but what I saw was mangled, and too big to be anything but a body. As I got close and recognized Sister Margaret, I started screamin'. I mean, of all people, Nick ... it was *her.* Do you know how many times I'd thought about killing her, watching her die with the greatest degree of agony possible?"

Of course I did. It was a stupid question. Growing up, it was all me and Tommy ever talked about.

"I almost drove away," Tommy continued, chewing his thumbnail and tapping the heel of his boot—*whup, whup, whup*—on the linoleum floor. "A car was coming and I had to hurry. Then I thought of you, Nick. What would you have done? So I picked her up and stuffed her in the trunk and brought her here. I knew you'd help me—you were always good at solving problems."

But not as good as you were at making them, I thought.

"Were you seen?" I asked.

"I don't think so."

"But you're not sure."

"No." He looked away. "But I don't think I was."

Well, that was a break. I began working things out in my head, calculating time and distance to a good dump site for the body. The quarry out on Rockland Road came to mind, as well as the old depot down by the abandoned train tracks. We could toss her down a coal shaft and not have to worry about digging. Damn, that would be a mighty bad stink, but that would be someone else's problem. Me and Tommy would have this problem off our hands forever.

Then an all too familiar pessimism came over me. We were going to get caught. We were going to rot in prison for the rest of our worthless lives. One of us would spill our guts about everything, be stupid. Or worse—*imbeciles.*

This is for imbeciles with pea-sized brains, echoed a harsh voice from the past. I could still feel the sting of the rosary slicing my cheek.

I looked up at Tommy and saw by the glaze in his eyes that he was reaching back into the past, too. Fifth grade, to be precise.

Back when little boys formed all sorts of conspiracies.

III.

Any visitor to Sister Margaret Finch's fifth grade

classroom would have been met with appalling sights, should the visitation have occurred unannounced and unexpected.

During a typical reading class it was not unusual for at least one child, after disappointing Sister Margaret by failing to successfully recite the definition of a vocabulary word, to have to stand in the back of the room with two heavy dictionaries held out straight from their bodies.

"If Jesus can suffer and die for our sins on the cross," she would intone in her raspy voice, "then you children can certainly atone for your stupidity!" Other times it was sitting with duct tape over our mouths, with the chair facing the corner. Still other kids had to stand in front of the whole class and listen in silence as the good sister ruthlessly and meticulously ranted on about all their physical flaws and undesirable character traits, and how God despised all the little sinners our parents brought into the world. I witnessed more than one bully break under this extreme hazing, their days as kings of the playground over with forever.

Sister Margaret's righteous logic and unwavering faith in her role as God's archangel on earth worked for her. When Sister Margaret spoke, no one interrupted. When she punished—which was always with the *joi de vivre* of the Marquis de Sade himself—we accepted it unquestioningly, like the beaten-down dogs that we were. It was all any of us could do not to shit ourselves in front of her. And the principal? A passing glance through our classroom window would show children sitting rigidly at their desks, hands clasped before them and their

attention focused raptly on Sister Margaret, who taught from the front of the room perched on a stool with a yard stick in one hand and a bible in the other.

In reality, we were all just too terrified to move.

For most infractions, a smack across the back of the hand with the yard stick was sufficient. The sting was sudden and terrible but left no marks, nothing that would require a creative explanation on Sister Margaret's part. On other occasions when rules were violated—such as the time when Timmy Wheeler lifted a cheek and let loose a squeaker while the good sister was conjugating a verb—Sister Margaret would lash out with the rosary, striking the violator across the cheek or on the temple. Those strikes hurt like wasp stings, and sometimes even bled ... but who'd complain? We suffered silently. Our parents, apparently feeling that Catholic education was best in the long run, turned a blind eye. Everyone knew and simply accepted that there were consequences for "Judases" who betrayed the confidence of Sister Margaret.

But Judas himself couldn't hold a candle to Tommy Beckwith.

Tommy was one of those kids whose mouth worked faster than his brain. A lot of kids wanted to plant a fist right in the middle of his squinty little face, for no better reason than to shut his mouth permanently. One day he dared to talk back to Sister Margaret. I had never before seen so bold a display of courage and stupidity.

"I don't believe Jesus did that," he blurted once during Religion class. The room fell completely silent after he said it. I could actually hear a lawnmower backfire from two blocks away.

"What did you say, Thomas Beckwith?" Sister Margaret glared from the chalkboard where she was scratching out a time line of Jesus' life. Her hand was suspended in mid-motion, her eyes black as crankcase oil.

I tried to signal to Tommy from across the room to shut his cakehole, but he didn't see me in time. And his mouth continued to runneth over.

"I said I don't believe Jesus really rose from the dead. He bled to death on a cross and then got put in a tomb behind a giant rock. Besides, the Romans whipped him and poked him full of holes with their spears. Who could have survived that?"

Sister Margaret calmly set her chalk down in the tray and wiped her hands on the rag she kept in her desk drawer. Next, she started fingering her rosary beads. She murmured a Hail Mary and an Our Father in cutting little whispers, and when she was through she opened her eyes and swept her gaze across the room. I felt my intestines clench and my stomach turn sour, and for one crazy second I feared all the sludge in my colon was backfilling into my stomach.

She began to speak: "'For God caused Christ, who Himself knew nothing of sin, actually to be sin for our sakes, so that in Christ we might be made good with the goodness of God.'"

She was quoting Corinthians 5:21 again, which usually meant an ass-kicking was coming.

"Who will come to the aid of young Thomas in his moment of doubt?" Sister Margaret cocked an eyebrow. "Anyone?"

The kid who took that bet would've been a goddamned idiot. Fortunately, most of us knew better. Except Tommy, the dipshit, who suddenly said, "Nobody can tell me I'm wrong. My dad's got real smarts, and he said that story is full of *crap*."

I held my breath, eager for the fireworks to start. There was nothing more thrilling than watching a furious teacher rip your best friend to pieces.

"*Still thy evil tongue, Thomas Beckwith!*" she roared, moving toward him with the eerie stealth of a viper stalking a rodent.

"I won't!" Tommy protested. "I hate you, Sister Margaret! All of us do. We wish you would die and your bones turn to rot and the bugs eat your tongue out!"

And that's when she struck, lightning-quick, pinching and twisting his ear between her talon-like fingers. Tommy howled in agony, dipped his head and tried to wriggle out of her grasp, but she was too full of religious righteousness now to take pity on him. Her eyebrows squeezed together and a thick vein throbbed in her forehead. Her boiling blood colored her face a deep scarlet; in stark contrast, the mole on the lower right side of her chin started thickening and turning an amazing shade of black, the three brown hairs sprouting from it seeming to grow longer. I know I was just imagining things, but I thought I was witnessing demonic possession that day.

She yanked Tommy out of his chair so cruelly I half-expected to see his ear go flying off and jets of blood hit the floor. He was shrieking now like a banshee, tears

and snot streaming down his face, his protests ignored as he was dragged kicking and screaming to the coat closet.

She opened the door. I glimpsed all our muddy boots and coats in there, but worst of all I saw the darkness. It wasn't just a coat closet, not after class began. In her own words, it was "the harshest punitive measure possible," one that she threatened us with daily. Reserved for any bad little boy or girl who needed a serious attitude adjustment.

Like Tommy.

IV.

"You know what I was just remembering, Nick?"

I shook myself out of reverie and looked across the table at him. "Yeah, Tommy, I think I do."

"We were right doing what we did to Nutters."

He was talking about Sister Margaret's beloved shih-zhu. "I thought you regretted it."

"Naw, not no more." A little less pain and a little more cold steel was returning to his voice, like the Tommy I used to know.

I thought about the body in the basement. "I think we paid her back twice."

"Still not enough, that bitch."

Let me tell you about Nutters.

V.

He was a yappy little mutt, the closest thing Sister Margaret Finch ever had to a child of her own. When she

was in one of her rare upbeat moods, she would tell us a story about something "nutty" he would do, like tear a hole in one of her curtains or chew a slipper or a sock. Once she even brought Nutters into class and set him on her desk, where she promptly lectured us on the innocence of animals and the wickedness of human beings. "If we could all be like Nutters, sweet and playful all the time, perhaps our salvation would not seem so distant." She gazed wistfully out the window. "But the Lord has plans for us, and I, children, have plans for *you*. It is my regrettable task to instill discipline in all of you. And I do not take this anointed role lightly."

At that moment, I hated that dog more than anything.

On an almost weekly basis Sister Margaret would interrupt her own lessons to talk endlessly about Nutters as if he were the lapdog of Christ himself. She always made a point to mention how much she cherished him because he wasn't a sinner, an imbecile, or a dunce like the rest of us. She never came out and said it quite that way, but we all knew. We weren't worthy to wipe that mongrel's ass.

Then, tragedy struck.

Sister Margaret missed a week of school, a week where an unbelievably kind and gentle teacher named Mr. Summers took over and made us actually want to come to school. He told us about the sudden and painless death of Nutters, apparently from a stroke of some kind during the night, and how wrecked Sister Margaret was because of it.

I looked over at Tommy. He was staring back at

me, a grin oozing across his face.

I had no idea what was on his mind, or what it might have to do with me, but I would find out soon. He was never the same after the coat closet incident. For a long time, he wouldn't even talk about it. Then, when he tried putting it into words, it never seemed to make any sense.

"Arms ... hands," he tried explaining once. "They were all over my body, touching me, wrapping themselves around my throat."

"It was just the coats," I assured him.

Same words, year after year, beer after beer. Nothing changed.

Sister Margaret had kept Tommy locked in the coat closet that day for over thirty minutes while she finished her lesson on Christ's life story. I tried to ignore the horrific screaming and pleas for help because I didn't dare leave my seat. I was furious, but at the same time too weak to do anything but copy the meaningless notes off the board. In all our years of friendship Tommy never once asked me why I didn't try to get him out. Truth was, I was a coward. So, in the logic of boys, I owed him one. I would do just about anything for Tommy after that.

Including, as it turned out, committing a little blasphemy.

At the end of the week when Sister Margaret was absent, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, Tommy showed up at my house. I could see by his grave expression he wasn't there for skateboarding.

"Let's take a little walk," he said tonelessly, and turned around and strolled back down the driveway. He knew I would follow, and I did.

"Where're we going, Tommy?" I asked, but he was silent. He carried a big jug of water with him, which he kept sipping from the whole way down the street. When we got to the end, we made a left onto Orchard Lane. Tommy finally stopped in front of a neat little blue ranch. A small rock garden and bird bath adorned the front of the house. An orange sign, BEWARE OF DOG, stood laughably in the front door. I knew right away whose house we were standing in front of.

"What are we doing here?" I asked nervously.

"Call it community service, Nick," he replied. The dead weight of his words chilled me.

We strolled up to the door and knocked. We waited a minute before we knocked again. Tommy took one more swig from his water bottle and then capped it. His left leg had the jitters.

"What's the matter with you?" I whispered.

"I gotta take a leak, Nick, but I'll wait. I'll wait for just the right moment."

On the second knock Sister Margaret answered. She looked like she'd been crying: her eyes were puffy and a tissue was scrunched in her meaty hand. Surprised to see us, she smiled brightly and said, "Thomas, Nicholas, what brings you both here on a lovely Saturday morning? Shouldn't you be out rollicking somewhere?"

I was so terrified I thought my own bladder was going to rupture, so I stayed buttoned up and let Tommy do all the talking.

"Sister Margaret," he began, "we're very sorry to hear about Nutters' death. You must miss him dearly. Nick and I just wanted to stop by and see if there was anything we could do to help you, like clean your house or something. You're always telling us how important community service is."

My mouth went slack and I had to remind myself to close it before I drooled. What was Tommy doing? Had he gone mad? I couldn't take my eyes off Sister Margaret, who scrutinized us with open and obvious suspicion. Probably none of her former students had ever showed her the slightest courtesy before–not that you could blame them.

Then, suddenly, she broke out in a dazzling smile, using muscles that probably felt tight and strange to her.

"There is room in God's house for a reformed boy!" she crowed, clapping her hands. "If Jesus can forgive Mary Magdalene her lascivious sins, then yes, boys, you may come into my house. Let us partake in some refreshments. I could use the company. It's been so awful lonely since Nutters passed away."

We followed Sister Margaret inside and sat in her sparsely furnished living room. When she left to prepare a tray of snacks, I whispered to Tommy, "What are we doing here?"

"You'll see," came his calm response.

She returned with three glasses of Coke and a plate of graham crackers. She set the tray on the coffee table before us and eased her bulk into a creaky chair next to the fireplace.

"Eat up, boys," she smiled. "There's more where

that came from."

I didn't think I could write a weirder script if I tried. Eating graham crackers and drinking Coke in Sister Margaret's house with Tommy, less than a month after she threw him in the coat closet like Daniel to the lions. Tommy was obviously up to something, and I knew my part in it was coming soon.

As we munched, I watched Sister Margaret's gaze trail upward to the mantel. Next to a set of picture frames sat a white porcelain vase. An angel with wide, feathery wings petting a little shih-tzu adorned the vase. Sister Margaret's lower lip trembled as she stared at it, and her fingers fluttered anxiously on her lap.

"My Nutters," she said in a shaky voice. I was only ten, but I remembered the day our Irish setter Chewy lost a game of chicken with a Chevy Suburban and had to be put to sleep. We cremated him, and spread the ashes around the outside of his doghouse.

"Is that..?" I began.

"Yes." She dabbed at her nose with the tissue. "It is. My Nutters, my darling little Nutters."

Jesus. Sitting up there on the mantel like it was her only child or something. I glanced at Tommy, who was no longer eating his graham cracker. He gazed intently at Sister Margaret. *Time for a little Old Testament pay back,* said the stone cold eyes.

"We're so sorry, Sister Margaret," he said softly. I didn't think she heard him at first, but then she gave him her full attention.

"Thomas Beckwith," she sighed, "would you like to see my doll collection? I have been dying to show it to

someone."

Tommy reached over and put an arm around my shoulders. "Do you know who loves dolls, Sister Margaret? Nick. His family has a collection of over *two hundred* dolls from all over the world, don't you, Nick?"

I nodded dutifully, resisting the urge to elbow Tommy in the ribs.

"Well then, Nicholas, you should be able to appreciate my collection." She rose and looked at Tommy, who remained seated on the couch. "Well, aren't you coming too?"

"I think I'll stay here and tidy up a little. I see you could use a little dusting. May I?"

Sister Margaret looked unsure at first, and then beamed. "Of course, Thomas. But be careful" —here the familiar dark clouds swirled in her eyes, probably the same way they did in Jesus' when he warned Mary Magdalene to stop whoring around— "and don't break anything. I would be devastated if anything happened to Nutters." She reached out and stroked the urn tenderly. "Promise?"

"Of course, Sister Margaret," Tommy answered kindly.

I don't remember if I was thinking about fate as I followed Sister Margaret down the hall, or if any part of me knew we were about to make the biggest mistake of our lives, but I doubt it. Tommy was destined to step over the line one more time; and I was destined to be his accomplice.

She led me into a dimly lit bedroom where dolls of various sizes sat in the dark with empty, creepy expressions painted on their rosy-cheeked faces. Sister

Margaret flicked on a light, and there in the dazzling glow were dozens upon dozens of shelves of dolls; dolls propped up in corners; dolls sitting on other dolls; dolls in boxes and on pedestals; dolls with such lifelike expressions I could feel my skin crawl.

"My favorite is this one." Sister Margaret picked up a blond little girl doll wearing a pink dress. "Puff-sleeved pink taffeta dress and little ribbons in her hair. Have you ever seen a more precious face, Nicholas?"

I wanted to puke. She showed me more dolls and peppered me with questions about my family's doll collection, which was a convenient lie, of course. The only dolls we had in the house were my baby sister's Raggedy Ann and a Barbie that usually sat around naked because I kept stealing the clothes. I couldn't speak. My tongue sat limp and dry in my mouth. I wished Tommy would hurry the hell up and finish whatever it was he was doing. What was taking him so long to dust the friggin' living room? Then I thought of what he'd said before we knocked on the good Sister's door.

"I gotta take a leak, Nick, but I'll wait. I'll wait for just the right moment."

An icy shiver raced down my spine.

I swiveled around when footsteps came down the hallway. Tommy stood in the doorway, a serene expression of *relief* plastered on his face.

"Sister Margaret," he said, "I'm afraid I must be getting home. I promised my parents I would clean the garage today, and I would hate to miss doing my chores. Let me first say that I appreciated your hospitality today, and I hope we'll see you back at school soon. That Mr.

Summers ... he's okay, but we all miss you very much."

"Oh, *Thomas,* "Sister Margaret gushed, "how very kind of you." And before she could say another word, we beat a hasty retreat. On the way through the living room, I glanced over at the mantel and noticed the urn was positioned just slightly off center. Perhaps Sister Margaret wouldn't notice. Or maybe Tommy *wanted* her to notice. Either way, the sacrilege had been done.

Pay back is a bitch.

For the next two sleepless weeks we waited by the phone for a call, or for Sister Margaret to show up suddenly at our door. Nothing happened. And she never returned to school again. Mr. Summers finished out the year, much to our delight, and mentioned Sister Margaret only once more, saying that she was taking an extended leave of absence, and that the death of Nutters took a bigger toll on her than anyone first imagined.

I fought back a smile when he said it. The biggest toll of all was probably discovering Nutters' ashes floating like a film of pond scum on the top of Tommy's piss.

VI.

"Let's get this over with," I said to Tommy, and stood up from the table. I had a plan. I finished off my beer and set the bottle in the sink with its other fallen comrades. Then I went to the basement door and stood at the top of the stairs, staring down into the dark. Tommy lurched out of his chair with a groan and stood behind me, his breath tickling the back of my neck.

"What are we going to do?" he asked desperately.

I thought about keeping it to myself. At least it would spare him from having to keep one more secret on top of all the rest. *One less cross to bear*, as Sister Margaret might have said. But there was no way I was moving that whale of a carcass without his help, and besides, it was his mess to clean up in the first place.

"C'mon," I said, patting his shoulder. "Let's get Sister Margaret the hell out of my basement."

"What about your sister?" he asked.

I froze. Damn, I almost forgot about Gina. "I'll call her and tell her I'm sick and not to come over."

"Sure she won't go Jane Marple on you and come over to check up on you?"

He had a point. It occurred to me just then that I should have called Gina before we brought the body in the house, and explained to her I wasn't up for company. Maybe she would have left me alone for once, or at least for the morning, which could have bought us enough time to dump the body somewhere. But I didn't even try, didn't even *think* of trying, and I had a hunch why that was. Sister Margaret Finch might have been dead, but she was surely not forgotten. The terror she planted in me all those years ago was still sprouting shoots, and one of them must have seriously knotted up my thinking.

"I'll give her a call," I said, brushing past Tommy to get to the phone. Before I reached it, however, it rang on its own. We exchanged a nervous glance.

"Don't answer it!" he said quickly, gnawing again at his raw nails.

"What if it's Gina?" I replied. "I don't want her to think something's up."

"Could be the cops!"

"Yeah, right." I smirked. "I'm on friendly terms with so many of them."

I answered the phone.

"Hi, Nick, it's Sherry." Tommy's sister. The biggest windbag in Livingston County, if not the state itself.

"Oh, hi Sher," I said amiably, mouthing *It's your stupid sister* to Tommy.

"Is Tommy over there by any chance?"

"Tommy? No, haven't seen him. Christ, it's only—" I glanced at my watch. Eleven thirty! Where had the morning gone? Were we really talking that long? If the beer bottles in the sink were any indication, our trip down memory lane lasted a lot longer than I'd thought.

"I need to see him right away," she said, edgy.

"What's the problem?"

"There's a deputy come looking for him this morning."

"A deputy? Why?"

As she explained, I wheeled around and glared at Tommy. That dumb son of a bitch.

"Uh, Sherry, can you hold on a minute? I got something on the stove." I muzzled the phone and suppressed an urge to bash it across Tommy's head.

"Were you supposed to meet your parole officer this morning, moron?"

The blood dumped out of Tommy's face. "Oh, *shit*, Nick."

Oh, shit, Nick. Probably what they'll write on my goddamn tombstone.

"Let me talk to her," he said, reaching for the phone.

"The hell I will."

"I want to explain to her what happened."

"Are you *crazy*?"

"She can help us, Nick. I trust her."

I tried to think of one good thing that could come out of Sherry Beckwith knowing anything about this, but nothing came to me. I've been wrong before, but not this time.

I was bringing the phone back up to my ear when I heard her say "—your place."

"Say again, Sher?"

"I didn't know what else to do, so I told the cops to try your place. If Tommy *is* there, Nick, and you're lying to me, get him out of there before they haul his skinny ass to jail."

"Oh my God, Sherry." An icy sweat broke out all over my body. "Do you know what you've done?"

Surprisingly, it wasn't the notion of Tommy's stupidity that puzzled me most: it was the lost time, the bad judgment in bringing the body into the house, the missed appointment with the parole officer, and now Sherry leading the cops to my place. It all seemed to suggest some *otherworldly* influence. Only one explanation was possible, and thinking about it made my temples throb.

Sister Margaret Finch was still alive. If not in flesh, then in spirit.

Suddenly, Tommy came charging up behind me and ripped the phone out of my hand and started

babbling into it. I stood by, dumbfounded, as I listened to him tell Sherry everything that happened, about Sister Margaret and the accident, and how we were going to ditch the body because no judge on Earth would believe his story and we'd be screwed, both of us, and sent to the clink for life. On that account, he was right. For once, Tommy was seeing things clearly.

Then I heard peals of laughter coming through the phone, and for one wild instant I thought they were coming from my own unhinged mind. My conscience finally cracking up, after being ignored for so long.

"What the fuck is so funny?" Tommy screamed at her.

I leaned in close so I could hear.

"*Sister Margaret*? You think you killed Sister Margaret today? You dumb shit, Sister Margaret is dead. Didn't you see her obit in the paper the other day? No, you wouldn't, since you don't read. She died two weeks ago—a stroke, I think. She was living in a little retirement community up in Vermont."

Outside, two car doors slammed.

In a moment of unusual and brutal clarity, I knew what had to be done.

I took the phone back and hung up on Sherry. "Get downstairs, *now*."

"What?"

"The cops are here, Tommy. They're going to ask questions and since they know we're friends, they may want to search the house. They won't bother with the basement, probably, not without a warrant. So get downstairs and hide in the storage closet now!"

"You mean, with *her*?"

"It's the only way."

"Nick—"

The doorbell rang.

"You can do it, Tommy. I helped you back then when you got revenge on Sister Margaret. I kept your secret all these years, now you do this one thing for me. Get in the closet one more time, Tommy, and then I promise this will all be over. We'll bury her today. We'll end this forever."

If only I believed my own words.

"All right," he said, grimacing sickly. "I'll do it for you, Nick."

As heavy knocks rained down on the front door, I followed Tommy downstairs to the storage closet. The space was small, but with most of Anne's stuff gone, the few items remaining could be pushed back to make room for Tommy and his ... roommate. Except he would either have to sit or stand on top of Sister Margaret like a giant air mattress, or hold her up and stand behind her. He opted for the latter. Watching him scoop her up under her stinking armpits and stand the body against himself so the door could close was one of the most awful sights I've ever seen, right up there with seeing a little boy get dragged by his ear into a coat closet.

Before I closed him in I saw his eyes bud with a childlike species of terror. Sister Margaret's head tilted forward, dimpled chin resting on his forearm, her mouth gaped and releasing a fetid stink like spoiled meat and cabbage.

"I'm sorry, I truly am," I said, and shut the door.

VII.

The knocks upstairs had changed to glass-rattling bangs. "Open up, police!" said a threatening voice. "We know you're home!"

I took a deep breath and arranged a pleasant smile on my face. When I opened the door there were two deputies standing on my front stoop, official frowns creasing both of their brows.

"You Nick Stiles?" the taller one demanded. His name badge read: A. Gwynn.

"Yes," I answered. "Something I can do for you, officer?"

"A word with you, please, sir."

I hesitated before letting them in because I thought I heard something heavy shift somewhere in the house.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Stiles?" Gwynn appeared to have a talent for the quizzical expression. His partner strained to see behind me, as if he heard the strange movement too.

"No, no problem," I said, shrugging non-committaly and stepping back from the door.

I followed them into the living room, which shamefully looked like a testing site for explosives.

"Nice place," said Gwynn, who apparently did all the talking for his partner. "Live here alone?"

I was about to answer with a snide remark about having to fire the housekeeper when a crash somewhere down in the basement cut me off, followed by a muffled

exchange of voices. One of which was Tommy's, and it sounded tortured. Gwynn's gaze shifted from the floor to me, and back again.

"What was that, Mr. Stiles?"

A waking nightmare, that's what it was. "Nothing," I said pleasantly.

"Wouldn't be Thomas Beckwith, would it, Mr. Stiles?"

"He's not here."

"Funny he's not here when his car is."

The sound of retching, clawing, and struggling came from below our feet again. I shot up from the couch and ran to the basement, leaving the cops to bask in the glow of solving their missing person case.

I took the stairs two at a time, calling Tommy's name hysterically, and dug frantically in my pocket for the key to the deadbolt hanging on the storage closet door. I shoved it in and waited for the lock to snap open, then stopped. All was still behind the closet door. Nothing seemed amiss, besides for an odd penetrating chill seeping through the door itself.

Muttering a prayer under my breath, I opened the closet and gasped.

Freezing air and a dense fog spilled out of the closet, gathering around my feet. The nightmare was over. For Tommy, at least.

He was gone ... dead, I mean. Hanging from the rafters, a strand of rosary beads fashioned into a noose around his neck. His vacant eyes—shot through with red veins and popping out of his skull from the intense pressure—stared at me with a mixed expression of horror

and perplexity. Aside from Tommy and a few pieces of junk, the rest of the closet was empty.

I started to shake all over. I couldn't draw any breath, and I collapsed to the floor where the tatters of fog were beginning to dissipate. A long darkness started rolling over me, threatening to shut me dow. I welcomed it, willed myself to go with it, to the silent waters where death was waiting to sweep me away.

I had a momentary vision just then, a blurring of the line between past and present, and saw Tommy as a boy crouching on the floor of the coat closet, swarmed by numerous arms and hands, clutching him and beckoning him to stay. Their little voices, the sweet confiding voices of the children, promised it wouldn't be so bad to stay, that Sister would take care of them and cleanse their souls so they could walk in the light again someday.

I longed to be there with them, to be cleansed.

As I watched my friend yield his soul to the tiny sinful mob and be pulled down into the closet forever, I thought about resurrections. I realized with perfect clarity why Sister Margaret had come back.

She was born of sin so that we may be cleansed of ours.

And now, years later, sitting in the darkness of my prison cell for a murder I didn't commit but was guilty of anyway, I wait for my own salvation to come.

I wait for Sister Margaret to come back for me.

BLOOD TIES

It was that thing in the creek, Mama. I ain't seen nothin' like it in my life. As the Lord is my witness, it was there—big and nasty—and it hurt me, Mama, it really hurt me."

"You lie still, child. Time's comin' now, and the pain's just gonna get worse."

"You still don't believe me."

"Superstition, Molly."

"You wasn't there!"

"Wasn't nothin' to see in that creek to get you all riled up so. Only monster you seen was that thing in the Tucker boy's pants. I listened to you for nine months now, and if there was somethin' in Sherman's Creek, why, your Pa woulda found it by now. Our town has its legends, most of the low country do. But last fall when you come a-cryin' back to the house about being raped by some creature, there wasn't nothin' to be found."

The girl screamed and thrashed on the bed, bucking her hips as the pain lanced through her.

"Ain't Jimmy's doin'," she gasped, after the spasm passed.

"Them Tucker boys are trash," her mother said. "Like their daddy, a bunk for each at Overland Correctional."

"I love him."

Her mother sighed. "How do you feel?"

"Clenches me tight. I can feel it movin' like a hot liquid inside me."

"Another contraction is all. Lie still. Not much longer now. Where's your pa at? Bringin' a fine baby into this world, pretty as a new nickel, and he's missin' the whole show!"

"You sent him to the creek, Mama."

"Yes, Molly. I sent him to the creek so's we can have some wet towels and water."

Terror, cold and colorless, passed behind Molly's eyes.

"Pray with me, Mama."

"Child, you know I always do. I keep you in my prayers every night. The Lord's always listenin' to us folks down here."

"I mean pray for Pa."

"There ain't nothin' in that creek."

"Somethin' ... *huge*."

"I'm worried 'bout you, Molly."

"The thing I saw, the thing with no hands, face or teeth, had a form like a man, 'cept not like no man I ever seen. It touched my heel underwater, and it felt like cold jelly. I smelled it, Mama, as ripe as dead catfish. Was awful when it crawled up on me, how it stared with no eyes."

"Stop it, Molly."

"It done spread my legs wide open as a gator's jaws, Mama, then it tickled me, kinda stung me after that, and then forced itself up inside me. It felt like my belly was bein' poked by a cattle prod. I was pulled underwater. I saw it wrap its arms round my waist and squeeze. Then it was gone up inside me."

Molly put her head down and wept. She saw the look in her mother's eyes—contempt and disbelief.

"No one believes me," Molly sobbed.

"Push now! I see its head."

"I don't want it, Mama!"

A blast of heat shot through her stomach.

"And you don't want it dyin' up inside you neither, child. Now breathe, baby, breathe, and push real hard—oh, it's gonna be so beautiful, God's child!"

"I ain't made love to God, Mama. That ain't the thing in the creek. Thing I saw was pure evil, wherever it come from. Where's Pa? Why ain't he back yet?"

"He'll be right back. Maybe he's smokin' one of his fancy cigars. Y'know, men ain't much good in these matters."

"The creek got him."

Dark, oily liquid soaked her things and dampened the sheets of the bed.

"Oh, my, ain't it big and healthy!" her mother exclaimed.

"It *hurts* ... "

"Lot more blood than usual, but no worry. This is your first, and it's bound to be the hardest."

"Mama, what's it doin'?"

"He's fightin' and squirmin' away from me. I got a grip, though, and he's gonna ... *sweet baby Jesus*!"

"What is it, Mama?"

"Ain't that strange."

The wind had softened into whispers like children playing outside the cabin's windows. A single lantern burned with a dying flame.

"Ssshhh, sleep a little bit, Molly. I got a fire goin' now, and you're safe. You're all right."

"Where's my child? I must've passed out."

"Molly, you rest first and then we'll talk. Truly, you're in no mind right now to hear 'bout it."

"I'm sore and thirsty. I don't hear no cryin'."

"A quiet baby."

"It ain't here, is it, Mama?"

"Just a minute, Molly."

"Where you goin'?"

"Checkin' on your Pa."

"He come back?"

"Found him at the creek."

"He seen sumthin'?"

"Molly, I got to tell you—"

"I ain't got my baby no more?"

"No, not no more."

"I'm relieved, Mama."

"You ain't the first."

"Gramma lost one of hers."

"Yes. And when you were very young, I lost your brother."

"You never had no more."

"No."

"What did you do with my brother?"

"What the Lord tol' us to do, Molly. We baptized him in the creek."

"Wasn't the Lord tol' you to do that, Mama! You seen the thing in the creek too. You know what it is! I hope you ain't given it my baby. It shouldn't have it."

"For all the generations the Holbeck family has lived in this cabin, hunted in these woods, raised their children, we always counted on that creek. It was our lifeblood, rushin' past us ever'day, and we always tapped into it. Sometimes even the Lord can miss things, maybe even at the bottom of our creek. Whatever it is, He would not have let no such monster exist side by side with our family. Lord, it terrified me the first time I saw it."

"Oh, Mama," Molly cried, "you gave it my baby. You let the creek wash it away, carry it to ... that horrible ... *thing*!"

Her mother dipped her head and sighed. "I know, Molly. Was a terrible thing I done."

"And Pa?"

"Your Pa saw it for the first time when he was down there earlier. The men folk never knew about it before, or why their wives insisted the stillborns—some were born healthy and promisin', but we fixed that—be washed away in the creek. Had a power over us, it did.

We couldn't deny it nothin', and it let our family alone in peace if each generation gave it one of our babies. But we can't give it no more sacrifices. Your Pa has declared it: The Lord's work shall be done."

"What're you doin' with that knife, Mama?"

"Cuttin' the blood ties once and for all."

"Get it away from me!"

"Pray with me, Molly. You're my only daughter and the last Holbeck child, and now there won't be no more. The generations of dyin' has got to stop sometime. *Right now*."

KEYS

by Gary Smith

(*Author's Note*: My father wrote this story some years ago, while I merely added a little embellishing. It is perhaps the most chilling story in this collection, as it tells the tale of unfettered access to one's darkest desires…)

When I was in eighth grade, I made an amazing discovery. While my friends were wadding up massive globs of toilet tissue, wetting them and throwing them up so they'd stick on the ceiling (which drove the janitor nuts, but at least it kept him busy), I discovered that the key to my bicycle lock could open the paper towel dispenser. I know it doesn't sound very earth-shattering, but it was the key, literally, to what I would become.

Knowledge is power! It's a cliché, but nevertheless, a true statement. I'm sure I wasn't the only kid to have that particular bicycle lock (and therefore that particular key), but I'm sure I was the only kid who knew what else that key could do. Since that day, I've saved every key I've ever owned, and actually bought things that came with keys if it was a size and shape I didn't have.

Over the years I have gained access to wondrous and mysterious places. I've made it a point, you see,

whenever I'm in an office building, hotel, theatre, or any other multi-floored facility to go where outsiders don't belong. I seek out the out-of-the-way corridors, stairways and floors to see where they go and what is contained within. Invariably they lead to locked doors, but my collection of keys has fit a great many of these forbidden locks.

I've been in storerooms, music rooms, bathrooms, closets, kitchens, offices ... too many places to name. I never worry about getting caught. I'm young and charming, and I just tell people I'm exploring. They send me back in the proper direction without a second thought.

Over the years, libraries have become my favorite haunt. I love to read and I love to watch people. Can you think of a better place? Old libraries, especially. Old libraries have dark and musty attics, basements and storerooms—a sneak's delight.

I don't know when I first got the idea to live in the library at the local university. Probably it was the day before I was to be evicted from my apartment. I've always been a loner and probably somewhat strange to someone who doesn't "share my passion," so I've had very few friends and lost very many jobs over the years. Anyway, I lost my latest job and was three weeks behind in the rent when I knew the ax was about to fall and I'd be out on the street.

Let me tell you about living in libraries, and then I'll tell you why this library was so perfect. Need food? Be in the library between four in the afternoon and six thirty. Night students come from work with their lunch bags and

invariably one or two will wander off to find a book or use the john. At that point, their food is yours. Need money? Same thing. No matter how many signs are put up about keeping your valuables with you at all times, some trusting bimbo always walks away and leaves her purse. I've even found guys' wallets left in their study carrels.

If all of this should fail you, I've learned that once the library closes, you can walk around all you want without fear of detection. All libraries have staff lunchrooms which usually contain a refrigerator and microwave. Add a petty cash drawer for fines, small purchases, etc. and you have your second source of food and money.

It was in this library that I experienced a dramatic realization that was to change my life. I realized that if I could go to places where no one would think to look for me, I could do things to people without fear of getting caught.

And what kinds of things do I do to people? All kinds, and none of them very nice. My mother always told me for as long as I can remember: "Do to them before they do to you. Get control of them before they get control of you." I watched her "work" as I got older. Oh, she could hurt people, and from the look on her face and the tone of her voice, it was always bitterly satisfying to her.

I never found out what made her this way, but it always seemed right. And if you love your mother as much as I did, you just naturally take on her ways.

I started off small hurting people mostly by taking their money and other valuable possessions. Then I got

into their psyches, too. My favorite was when I watched this guy in my library for several days straight. He was doing some serious research on something and accumulating an enormous stack of three by five index cards. One day when he got up to go to the can, I took all his cards. You should have been there when he got back. He had such a look of despair on his face as he looked around hoping against hope that he could spot some guy running away, catch him and retrieve his cards.

I was the only one around, of course, and when he asked me I just smiled and told him that I had just gotten there and, no, I didn't see anyone. He didn't give me another thought—people don't. He just went back to his little study area and started to cry. That was great! People can always replace money or buy more food; I loved the psychological damage that I realized I could do.

Oh yes, I promised that I'd explain why this library was perfect. Picture this: a massive library on a major university campus, three main floors of books, computer lab, a cafeteria and study areas. But now it gets good. Above the top floor are four smaller levels where the much older books are kept for the serious grinds or those looking for a gravely quiet place to take a snooze. From a far corner of the highest of these additional levels, there extends a narrow stairwell that goes up to the bell tower. The door to the stairwell is not locked, but, of course, the door at the top that actually opens to the bell tower *is*. Perhaps a significant percentage of the students (though certainly not the majority) know of the existence of these old, sparsely used floors, but very few of the ones who know about them ever use them. Of the few who use

them, fewer still bother to go all the way to the highest of them. I'm sure that leaves a very small few who know of the existence of the stairs to the tower, and any who might have ventured to the top were certainly stopped by the locked door.

Guess what? I had a key that fit the lock! It took a lot of jiggling and a few bad words, but I opened the door and walked into the bell tower three months ago today.

Dust was everywhere and spiders ruled the terrain. The bell mechanism was there as was the back of a giant clock that faced the campus and had long since stopped running. Off to one side of the chamber was a door leading into a storeroom which housed the tools and cleaning supplies needed to clean and maintain the bells and the clock. The storeroom also contained several tarps and old rugs. That door was unlocked since, presumably, anyone who had a key to gain access to the tower in the first place, had a right to anything in that storeroom. Before long, the bell tower became my home.

So here I am. I look like a student, and always have textbooks with me. I have the run of the building when I want it and come and go as I please. I do to them before they do to me (Momma would be so proud), and I killed my first fellow human being two months ago.

As much as I enjoyed the mind games and the irritations and inconveniences that I caused, I knew I had to progress. I needed to establish total control and to inflict the ultimate hurt. I found some thin but immensely strong wire behind the science building one day. To each end I attached a sturdy clothespin and made a highly effective garrote for myself. When not needed it was very

compact, but when it was utilized, it could kill in a very few seconds.

I tried it first on a cantaloupe. It cut through the melon like a hot knife through butter. I subsequently perfected the technique so that I could dispatch whomever I wanted quickly and simply. The device cut off their air supply so quickly that screaming was impossible. It then continued to sink into the throat, would eventually disappear, and first cause strangulation; then, if I continued to twist, it would slice right through the neck neatly severing the head.

My first victim was female. In fact, so were all my victims except one. I'm not a very big person, so moving the body after the deed was done was a concern. The one male I dispatched was built like a twelve year old so he didn't represent much of a problem. That one incident convinced me, however, that killing females is far more satisfying. She was a dark-haired Italian girl. I appeared to befriend her by sitting near her and pretending to study as she did. We would talk once in a while, so when I came up behind her one day she was totally unconcerned.

In a flash I had my wire around her neck. A couple quick pulls to embed it was all it took. No screams or struggling—just surprise, shock, and quite a bit of blood. I always selected my victims from people sitting at individual carrels rather than an open table, so the amount of blood, while at first shocking, could be contained. Also, if anyone else happened along at the time, I could lay her head down and it would appear that she was taking a break and resting.

Since there were so few people about in that part

of the library at that time, I was able to move her upstairs into my home with no problem. I placed her in the storeroom under one of the tarps. She had some money in her purse which helped on the practical end, but the experience would have been worth it even if she had been broke. After "doing it" to her, I knew I had found my calling, and, more importantly, I knew that Momma would be proud.

During the next three weeks I killed other people, including one guy. With each one I become more proficient. I learned just how quick and hard to twist my device to obtain whatever effect I wanted. I could make people live long enough to struggle and fully understand what was happening to them, or I could make it so quick that they might never have felt a thing. I could cause very little blood to spill or a great deal. It all depended on my mood.

My count of pitiful victims reached five by last week. There were stories in the local newspaper as well as the campus rag about the missing students. Of course they were all traced to the library at one point of the last day on which they were seen, but nobody could say with any certainty what times they might have been here or when they left. Naturally it was assumed that they did not leave.

The early ones were getting pretty rare by now. The only bad thing about my accommodations was that it was hot and stuffy up there. The smell was bearable up there in the chamber, but when the storeroom door was opened, the putrid stink of rotting meat hit you right between the eyes. I found, fortunately, that after the

initial couple of seconds, I really didn't mind the stench of decomposing flesh.

I decided at the time of my most recent kill two days ago that I would extend my hurt to her family in an additional way. You see, I realized that someday my little cache would be discovered. I'm not stupid, you know. When the bodies were discovered the parents would want a funeral, showing, proper burial, etc. I have robbed people of their children, now I must deny them their funeral arrangements.

With my trusty Swiss army knife and a razor blade, I went to work on her face. I dug the eyes out, hollowed out the cheeks on both sides, broke the bone in her nose and worked it until I could push the nose straight down into her face. Then I neatly sliced off the ears, and with my razor blade removed her lips. *Let them try to show her now.* If they didn't find her for a long time, then all that was an unnecessary (but fun!) exercise. If they should find her soon, however, it would be a nice little touch, a calling card of sorts.

Yesterday I found out how it was going to go down. According to an article that appeared in the campus newspaper, Maintenance was to give the chimes in the bell tower their annual cleaning and restoration tomorrow morning.

I'm a practical person! I knew this arrangement was not going to last forever. There was nothing to do now but go into a self-preservation mode. I gathered up my belongings, of which there were very few, and made ready for my departure tomorrow morning, for I knew when next I left my safe haven, I would not be returning.

At seven o'clock the next morning I left my home for the last time, my "house guests" comfortably tucked into their tarps. I selected a book I would enjoy reading and situated myself at a table offering a view of the stairs going up to the upper levels and the tower. I was on the highest floor that I could be on and still merge with enough other people so as to not appear conspicuous. I wanted to be close enough to get a feel for the reaction which this discovery would cause, but not close enough to be inadvertently drawn into it.

At ten o'clock sharp, the first of the workers arrived. I watched as he read through an old manual, skimming for some apparently vital information. He also checked the keys on an old key ring. Both the keys and the manual looked like they had been around for a hundred years (and probably have). By this time he was joined by three other workers and they made their ascent.

I did some of my best acting ever as I feigned interest in my book. Every cell of my body was straining for the first sounds of discovery. I didn't have long to wait.

It started with a crash, like someone dropping a heavy toolbox. Then followed spasms of coughing in which it seemed one of the workmen tried to cough up a lung. Next—no doubt a result of discovering the bodies, including "The Faceless Wonder"—came retching so awful that it caused one of my fellows to lose his breakfast just listening to it. Ah, the symphony of human revulsion!

Naturally within a few seconds, the death stench came drifting down to all of us. Others of my numbers became sick as well. When the crackling sounds of their

two-way radios began, I knew they were calling Security, and then Security would call 911, and the full local police force with FBI assistance perhaps would descend on this prim and proper university library that had up till now no more controversy than when to extend study hours for final exams. I had changed all that. Little ol' me. I guess you could say I flatter myself.

Anyway, I had to leave. I gathered up my textbooks and personal notebooks, threw my purse over my shoulder—my purse containing my keys and my garrote—and headed for the main exit. As I approached the heavy glass doors, I saw that Security had arrived and was heading into the building. In spite of their concern and apprehension, they were still gentlemen enough to hold the door open for me. Guys still do that for cute blonds, you know.

Where am I going? I don't know yet. There are lots of buildings to explore, doors to open and people to hurt. There's a major city 75 miles west of here; maybe I'll head there. It doesn't matter. A door is a door, and I have my keys.

Part II
Home is Where the Blood Is

"I've always felt that the real horror is next door to us, that the scariest monsters are our neighbors."

–George A. Romero

Leak

Stan McCullen rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the sweat from his forehead, and listened to the groans and creaks of the house's old timbers.

Something had awakened him. A sound coming from somewhere in the house. Below him, possibly, but he couldn't be sure.

Probably the foundation settling, he thought. Stan sat up in bed, wincing from arthritic pain shooting through both shoulders. *My own timbers aren't doing much better.*

But at least he was still alive, and for that Stan muttered a little prayer of thanks every morning.

Gray morning light bled through his bedroom curtains. A steady rain droned on the windows. He sat on the edge of the bed, straining to hear the sound that had stirred him from slumber. To Stan, it sounded like a pipe bursting followed by heavy drops of water, but he couldn't trust his murky memory.

What he heard now on this miserable Monday morning was the hiss of car wheels speeding by and

children splashing in puddles on their way to school. Nothing out of the ordinary. No singularly peculiar sounds to be alarmed about.

I must have been dreaming, he thought. Though it was a damn strange dream. Wouldn't be the first time since Nancy died that he'd awakened from troubled sleep. Nor, probably, the last.

Frustrated at his sleeplessness, Stan sat up in bed and put on his glasses and thought of how to fill the long day ahead.

He considered a shower and then decided against it—he was sick of looking at water, after two weeks of solid rain—and slipped into the same jeans, T-shirt, and slippers from yesterday and padded down into the kitchen.

Into the gloom.

The heat was ungodly for this hour, the worst summer he could remember. And the muggy house trapped heat in it like a bucket held water. The windows couldn't be opened to let in a cross breeze because of the rain, and even if they could the house would simply breathe in more hot, dank air.

"Guess I'll skip breakfast," he said aloud, for the company of his voice. If Nancy were still alive she'd chide him for such unhealthy choices. Except Nancy wasn't alive, Nancy was in the ground six months now, and Nancy was never coming back.

So I can go right ahead and skip my breakfast. I can even open a Pabst Blue Ribbon right now if the spirit moves me, because there's no one left who's gonna slap me on the wrist like a naughty schoolboy and tell me otherwise.

Which was exactly what Stan McCullen did.

"Now I better find the source of that noise," he said, wiping foam off his upper lip.

Yet Nancy wouldn't stay out of his thoughts. He stared at her favorite chair at the kitchen table, the one with the faded rose-patterned seat cushion, and remembered how they'd met and married while he was a private at Fort Drum in Upstate New York. She waited faithfully through a so-called police action in Korea and later a war in Vietnam for him to return safely. Both cases he came away unscathed from combat. When his esteemed military career was up, they moved to this quiet suburb with their children, who had long since moved away. They made many new friends, but now they were all pushing up daisies in the local cemetery.

Resolved to get to the bottom of the noise, he left the kitchen and entered the living room. He surveyed the shelves of knick-knacks, books, yesterday's dinner dishes piled up on an end table next to the sofa, and Nancy's old porcelain doll collection, whose glassy eyes always seemed to stare straight through him (one of these days he'd bag them up and take them down to the municipal dump, they gave him the heebie-jeebies something fierce).

Nothing in this part of the house was out place. Nothing damaged, fallen, shattered, or dropped. Of course, what did he expect to find? Stan did a sweep of the rest of the rooms, closets, bathrooms, and the sparse pantry. In all, the search took ten minutes. He did everything a man could do.

Then what was still gnawing at him?

He forgot about the basement. When was the last

time he was down there? Months? Maybe three or more? It was hardly more than a root cellar, with a few boxes of moldy holiday decorations, rotted fruit crates, and old jars of Nancy's canned peaches and tomatoes.

He wasn't fond of the idea of going down there. Insects, for one, were a problem. He had an inherent dislike for anything with multiple legs and wings that stole away into the dark.

And the basement had a smell like an old sponge, a sponge way past its freshness, reeking of bacteria soaked up through all its scrubbings.

"Well," he sighed, trudging up to the dreaded door. "Soon as begun as soon as done."

The hinges creaked as he swung the door open, and a putrid gasp of mustiness and vegetable rot blasted him in the face. He tried the light switch but it was dead.

"Crimony." Something was wrong down there. It had never smelled that bad before or felt that cold in the forty years he had owned the house.

As the stink finished wafting over him and Stan turned to face the basement once again, a flicker of movement caught his eye below. It happened fast, almost too fast to register.

Then, the faint sound of splashing.

Stan reached for the emergency flashlight he kept clipped to the wall, flicked the switch, and shined it down into the darkness.

Oh my God. Water. Lapping at the bottom two steps.

The light shimmered on the choppy surface of the brackish water. Why would it be choppy? he wondered,

and then didn't want to know. He was terrified of the thought of what could have nested down there, raised a family, perhaps even started a fraternity of disgusting little vermin.

Could rats swim? Damned if he knew.

Stan pulled back from the stairwell and slammed the door shut. He dropped down onto his wife's chair at the table. His heart knocked against his ribs and his head began that familiar slow, pulsing ache—the kind only a cold compress and a dark room could soothe.

"Last thing I need is a migraine right now," he said, rubbing his temples. He had phone calls to make now, contractors to deal with to assess the damage to his—

The telephone rang.

His lip curling in anger, Stan crossed the kitchen and snatched the phone off the wall cradle.

"Who is it?" he growled.

"Pop?" His son-in-law, Lewis, and his weekly check-in-on-the-crazy-old-bastard phone call. "How are you doing over there?"

"Fine." Too crisp. He would have to tone it down if he didn't want a case worker showing up at his doorstep. That was the kind of shit Lewis and his daughter, Kate, would pull on him.

You seemed anxious, Dad, he could hear Kate explain. *We were concerned about you living all alone in that big empty house.*

Concerned my ass, he'd answer, as he did every time he had this hypothetical conversation. *You just want to keep a close, greedy eye on your inheritance.*

That was cruel, but in his heart he knew it was true.

"Pop? You still there?"

"Yes, Lewis, hi. You just caught me about to water a bush. I had my breeches down and my pecker in my hand when you called."

"Oh." Lewis laughed. "Sorry."

"No problem." Stan shifted the phone to the other hand to keep a better eye on the basement door. "So, my boy, to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"Can't a guy just call his favorite father-in-law to say hello?"

"You must mean me, considering I'm your *only* father-in-law. Unless you've become one of those weird polygamist Mormons."

He heard Lewis muffle the phone and whisper something to someone. Then Kate's unmistakable squealing laughter filled the line.

"Kate says my only other lover is Cheetah, our new tabby cat," said Lewis.

"A cat? Kate's allergic to those fuzz balls."

"Hmm." Lewis was quiet for a moment. "She never told me that."

And I'll bet there's a lot more she never told you, Stan wanted to add.

"Well, Lewis," he said instead, "I'd love to chat, but I really gotta get going here."

"Pop, are you sure everything's all right?"

Stan ground his teeth. "Yes, Lewis. Why do you keep asking?"

"Well, you just sound ... out of breath."

He thought of the thing (whatever it was) swirling around in the filthy water of the basement, having a giddy time in McCullen's Sea World.

"Son, now listen," he said. "Everything is fine at my end. You just take care of my little girl. She was raised a country gal and the big city life can be a little terrifying."

"All right, Pop," he said doubtfully. "We're just concerned about you. Ma's been gone six months now and we know you blame yourself. We just don't want you to, ah—"

"Do something crazy? Like eat a bullet or drive off a bridge or swallow enough pills to put Rite-Aid out of business? You actually think I would do something like that?"

"No, no, of course not!"

"Then let an old man rest in peace." He should have rephrased that but it was too late; besides, he was too steamed now to give two shits and a nickel what Lewis and Kate thought.

"I have to go," he said, "but tell my Kate I said not to worry, that I love her, and that she ought to be more worried about her delusional husband than her cranky old father."

Lewis sighed. "Okay, Pop."

Stan hung up the phone.

There was another problem.

The crack in the ceiling, where the wall met the ceiling above the kitchen sink. Bubbles of dirty water formed along the hairline, and went sliding down the wall like tears.

Shaken, Stan turned away from the sink and threw open the basement door. Taking shallow breaths through his mouth to lessen the fetid stink, he descended the stairs, passing the flashlight's beam back and forth over the water as he looked for any sign of movement—rat or otherwise.

Nothing broke the surface. And as far as he could see in the feeble light, nothing swam in the murky depths, either.

Stan took a few more steps down and stopped just above the water line. By leaning forward and dipping his head below the doorframe, he could scan the rest of the basement with the flashlight. The inventory looked the same as usual. A broken washer and dryer, a now-flooded furnace, and wooden shelves built onto the concrete block walls glinting with mason jars full of Nancy's preserves. Sodden crates of rotted vegetables accounted for most, though by no means all, of the stench down here. Newly-formed cracks in the block walls leaked water ... an astonishing amount, by Stan's reckoning. The angular arm of the out-matched sump pump sat cold and silent in the far corner.

That's what I must have heard this morning. When it overloaded and died, it must have woken me up.

Something fast and sleek sped across the inky water.

A blade of terror stabbed his heart. Stan jerked back from the shapeless thing as it crossed the beam of his light, and his glasses slipped off his nose. They clattered on the last dry step and bounced into the water.

Terror struck him in a nauseous wave. He had to get his glasses back—he had the visual acuity of a mole without them—but stick his hand in that water ... no goddamn way! But what other choice did he have? Stagger back upstairs, grope his way to the kitchen phone, punch in 911, and explain ... *I dropped my glasses in the dark, wet basement. Come rescue them, please, I'm an old man!*

Never during his military career did he have to radio in for back up, and he wasn't about to start now.

Exhaling in frustration, he squatted down and felt around in the freezing water for the glasses. Horror twisted his stomach into knots. He thought of a time when he was a kid and, on a dare, he stuck his hand in the gaping hole of a diseased tree trunk. He flaunted the odds back then that nothing inside was going to strike him, and he flaunted the odds again now.

He groped around in the muddy water but found nothing.

Shit. He wasn't going to back down now. He would need to take a step into the water. *Just one, maybe no more than two*. If he was lucky. And he should probably let go of the railing, so he could search faster with both hands.

Stan put the flashlight between his teeth and stepped down into the icy water, which rose to about the middle of his calves. He bent down and made a methodical sweep with both hands. Dirt, silt, and grainy material like bits of concrete passed through his fingers.

Then, just as he was about to give up, his fingers closed on something.

Success! He recognized the feel of his glasses' metal frame and yanked them out of the water. At the same moment he pulled them out, something smooth and fleshy seized his wrist and tried to wrest the glasses out of his hand. "Give them back!" he screamed, flailing his other arm at whatever the thing was. He was practically blind, and all he could make out was a vague shape of something human-like, but he couldn't be sure. He threw a punch and his fist brushed against the thing's outer coat of slime, and a garbled cry and a ferocious stink assaulted his senses. The thing released his glasses and Stan quickly slid them onto his face, wishing he hadn't, wishing he had let the godforsaken thing keep them as its trophy.

The thing had a lumpish head, two slitted black eyes, and a long, rippled body of gray putrefying flesh. A row of blackened points that once must have been teeth lined the inside of its glowering mouth. It made wet gurgling noises, as if it was trying to speak, but all it sounded like to Stan was a clogged drain.

Stan held his hands up in self-defense while his heart pounded a hole through his chest. With a grunt, the thing pitched forward and sank those diseased teeth into wrist. Stan shrieked as blistering pain burned all the way up his arm and into his shoulder. The thing released him a moment later and flipped backward into the water.

Stan turned away and raced back up the stairs to the safety of the kitchen and the daylight, cradling his searing wrist and sobbing in disbelief. Two rows of puncture wounds drooled blood.

"Why is this happening to me?" he cried to the empty room.

Because you let it leak, answered a harsh voice. Stan couldn't be sure if it came from his own thoughts or somewhere in the house.

Somewhere down below.

"Lewis? It's Stan."

The phone was answered on the first ring, as if Lewis knew the old man would be calling back to admit he needed their help to rescue him from his lonely existence. Piss on that! The only thing he needed was a simple answer to a simple question, and if Lewis was good for anything—and Stan had his doubts—it was advice on handyman matters, being a carpenter by trade.

Lewis said, "I knew something was up, Pop. You don't call unless you need something, and you never need anything!"

"Now's different." Stan hated asking for help, but the urgency of the matter called for it. "I just need a little advice."

"Anything, Pop."

Stan drew in a quivering breath and stared at his heavily bandaged wrist. Blood soaked through the gauze. The wound throbbed slow and steady.

"Tell me how I can drain a flooded basement," he said.

The jagged crack over the kitchen sink mocked him.

It inched a little further along the wall while Stan was talking to Lewis, leaking heavily and discoloring the yellow paint around it. Stan swallowed hard, trying to

keep his attention on Lewis's directions.

Over the electric stove and refrigerator other cracks were forming, bigger leaks that bled foul water. The redolence of stagnation filled the air now. Stan thought of houses old and long-forgotten, houses standing on hills or other remote places abandoned and dilapidated, haunted by faded laughter and the memories of better times.

Stan felt more alone and helpless now than he ever had in the past six months. He thought, *If you're listening, Nancy, I'm sorry.* Knowing in his heart it was too late.

An hour later, Stan had his yellow rain slicker on and was scrutinizing the basement one more time from the top of the stairs. The water raised another two steps. Cursing, Stan left the house and drove to the hardware store, the supply list in hand that Lewis had given him.

Normally driving was like letting clever little hands untangle his knotted thoughts. But now it seemed like too much work—the possibility of hydroplaning into a ditch demanded his full, white-knuckle attention. Rain sluiced in swift channels into overflowing storm drains on either side of the road. The wipers beat relentlessly to try to clear a patch of glass for him to see through. His headache from earlier returned with a vengeance.

"You would've hated all this rain, Nancy," he muttered. Nancy was a lover of sunshine, bandstand music, and promenades, all the simple things lost and forgotten in the advent of a new century. Dark skies and dreary weather depressed her. One day in particular stuck

like a thorn in his mind. They were sitting in the kitchen perusing sections of the newspaper when Nancy looked up and glared loathingly at the rain. Made his flesh crawl. Then the odd, dreamy voice with which she said her next words haunted him every day since.

"When I die, Stan, I don't want the coffin to leak."

Stan stared at her. It was the first uncompromising demand Nancy had made of him after fifty years of marriage. And it came at a time when her health was suspect, a flu bug ravaging her frail body with alacrity.

"You won't know the difference," he reasoned.

"I'll know," she said, wiping her nose. A glint of warning in her rheumy eyes chilled him. "And I'll know you spared expense, at the cost of soaking me in that vile water."

"Ridiculous." He snapped the paper and clucked his tongue to show his frustration with her impertinence. "I'll hear no more of it."

And he was right. No more of it was ever mentioned again. The decision was irreversible.

Nancy McCullen's coffin was not going to leak.

And Stan, by God, would make sure of it.

She died two weeks later of complications from her illness, leaving Stan to make a discouraging decision. Dip into his retirement savings (which were stretched thin enough in today's economy) to assuage his wife's demands, or bury Nancy in a pine box special with an economical concrete slab for a grave marker. It was a question of do you eat with a heavy conscience or starve with saintly purity?

He loved Nancy, adored her, revered her wisdom in matters of family and money, but this one time he had to disagree. Starving in the little time he had left, after the struggles he'd endured in his life, just wasn't an option. He supposed it was unfair because Nancy wasn't around to defend her position, but she was in a nicer place far above this rain and misery, looking ahead to the trials of her next life instead of ruminating on this one. If her body lay in water, if it got infested by worms, if her bones were absorbed and recycled back into the earth instead of lying snug and secure in a silk-lined titanium tube, would she really care? *Are the dead really paying attention?*

Shaking his head to clear the memory, Stan turned down Elmwood Avenue and pulled into Fulbright Funeral Home.

He was no expert on matters of the dead and didn't pretend to be, but he had to know about the coffin he purchased. He had to know how it would hold up in the rain. And how much it would leak.

"Mr. McCullen!" The funeral director, John Fulbright, approached Stan as he entered and shook his hand briskly.

"Mr. Fulbright," Stan said. He nodded respectfully in the direction of a bereaved couple sitting in the parlor. Their faces were drawn and sad as they contemplated an ornate mahogany coffin. Must cost a bundle, Stan thought guiltily.

The funeral director smiled officiously. "What can I do for you today, Mr. McCullen?"

Stand lowered his head and murmured, "I need to

speak with you about that coffin you sold me. It's an emergency."

"Right this way."

In his office, Fulbright leaned back in his executive leather chair as Stan told his story, his hands clasped behind his head. In that position he looked haughty and more than a little bored. Exactly like he did the day he swindled me on the price of the funeral, Stan thought bitterly.

Fulbright sat forward when Stan was finished, removed his glasses, and massaged the bridge of his nose. "So let me see if I have this straight, Mr. McCullen. You're telling me that you somehow know your wife's coffin is leaking, and her spirit, or whatever it was you thought you saw, is angry about it? Do you ... I mean ... have you got any evidence to prove this?"

Stan frowned. "I know how I sound, like some idiotic teenager in a goddamn horror movie, but my house is leaking like the Titanic. It may even be haunted, for all I know."

"Leaking?" Fulbright stared incredulously. "Haunted?"

"Yeah, real bad. And then there's this." Stan held up his wrapped hand. Fulbright stretched his skinny neck forward to inspect the blood seeping through the layers of bandages. His face twisted in revulsion.

"This goes beyond my area of expertise, Mr. McCullen. What you need is a doctor. And of more than one variety, I'm sure."

"Don't patronize me," Stan growled.

Fulbright cleared his throat. "Assuming this is not a prank and something *extraordinary* is going on in your house, what does any of this have to do with the coffin I sold you?"

"The pine. You said it might leak."

"I believe I told you with impunity it would leak."

"But how badly," Stan knew his voice sounded one inch shy of crazy, but he didn't care, "and what happens to a body in there?"

"An embalmed body such as your wife's, when exposed to as much water as we've had lately, will quickly deteriorate," Fulbright explained. "The flesh will bloat and decompose, the organs liquefy, and the soupy mess will eventually drain out the orifices and leak through the rotted boards of the wooden cof—"

Stan put his hand up. "Thank you!" *Soupy mess.* Jesus, it was his wife they were talking about here!

"I was only trying to be helpful," said Fuller.

"Forget it." Stan moved toward the door. "I don't need any more of *your* help." He had given orders on the battlefield that had sent good men to their deaths, watched them twist and die in a barrage of enemy gunfire, and more than once cradled the head of a wounded soldier who expired right before his eyes, but the thought of Nancy lying in that gruesome state underground ...

Stan, pale and shaken, left the funeral home.

Rain pelted his back as Stan hurried from his car to the house. Once inside, he leaned against the door and listened with growing disdain to the infernal howl of the wind and rain.

A few more days of this and I'll need a goddamn ark.

He examined his wrist. The blood stain had spread to the edges of the wrap, the soaked gauze almost completely red. The pain had worsened, too, throbbing with an intensity that brought tears to his eyes.

As he moved away from the door a drop of water struck his eye. A new leak, this time coming through the living room ceiling. Stan stared at the deep brown crack hemorrhaging water at the rate of one drop every second.

"Cut it out already!" He shook his fist at the ceiling and stamped his foot. "For chrissakes, Nancy, leave me alone!"

He set his bags from the hardware store down and rushed to the basement door. He put his ear against it. Held his breath. Silence. Save for the trickling of water from the leaky kitchen walls, Stan could hear nothing in the house.

He grasped the doorknob, opened it. Braced for the smell.

And gasped at what he saw.

The basement was submerged. The black flood engulfed the staircase, sloshing back and forth and splashing water on the tops of his shoes. The scent of burnt circuits tickled his nose. The electricity would be gone and by nightfall he would be alone in the dark. With *it*. Madness rushed over him, and he dropped the pathetic hose he had thought might help him begin draining the basement, slammed the door shut, bolted it, jammed a chair under the knob, and backed away slowly like a man who'd trapped a dangerous and cunning animal.

He scrambled upstairs to hastily pack a suitcase and call Lewis and Kate. He'd beg if he had to. They'd

have to let him stay with them. Hell, at this point he was willing to concede that he shouldn't be living by himself anymore and needed their help. And besides, Nancy wouldn't follow him there, would she? Stalk her only child?

Although, come to think of it, Kate suggested the lovely cost-efficient pine box in the first place.

Splashing through puddles in the upstairs hallway that hadn't been there that morning, Stan stopped at the threshold of his bedroom. His anxiety eased as he saw the dry walls and floor, but returned when he noticed the condensation bubbling and cracking the paint in the master bathroom. Stan crossed to the bathroom and went inside. Moisture steamed the medicine cabinet mirror. He touched it and jerked his hand back quickly. Cold to the touch, like the water in the basement. The air was humid as a rain forest but the walls were weeping ice water.

Far below him, Stan heard the thing in the basement snort and splash. He also heard another sound, a choked and gurgled word.

It sounded like his name.

The telephone next to his bed rang.

"Lewis? Kate?" he answered frantically.

"Mr. McCullen? Am I speaking to Stan McCullen?"

His stomach felt hollow with disappointment. "You are. Who's this?"

"You don't know me, sir, but I was contacted by your son-in-law, Lewis. My name is Will Shepherd and I'm a contractor who specializes in basement renovation and repair. Apparently you have some structural

problems?"

Stan found the question profoundly funny. "You could say that." He stared at his bloodied hand. "I have a ... leak."

"I see. Lewis is complaining of the same problem in his basement now."

Oh, God, no. Kate!

"It's really quite common, considering the weather lately. Now tell me, Mr. McCullen, has this ever happened to you before?"

"No, sir, it hasn't." A tear sped down his cheek.

Shepherd cleared his throat. "Well, I might be out later for an evaluation if that's all right with you."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," said Stan.

"The sooner we can get this problem under control—"

"I think it already has control!" Stan didn't recognize his own laughter.

"I think we can remedy all of this at an affordable price for you, Mr. McCullen," Shepherd continued.

Stan's voice rose an octave in hysteria. "You mean *cheap,* don't you, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Of course. I'm the cheapest, and the best, in the business."

A series of crashing blows against the basement door thundered through the house. Stan squeezed the phone painfully. "Oh my God."

"Is anything the matter, Mr. McCullen?"

Wood groaned and splintered. The sound of something wet and heavy thudded on the kitchen floor.

Shepherd pressed on in his damnably reasonable

tone. "We can try sealing all the cracks with hydraulic cement, install drain lines if necessary and run them into a deep well in the backyard. I'll get in touch with a soils engineer who specializes in drainage systems, and then we'll get right to work on your problem. Sound okay to you, Mr. McCullen?"

A kitchen chair was shoved aside. A table leg scraped the linoleum floor.

Stan dropped the phone. The blood, by Christ! Flowing out from under the bandages, lacing around his arm, pooling between his fingers, and striking the floor in quarter-sized drops. Delirious and weak, Stan slumped to the floor.

"Mr. McCullen? Are you still there? Would you classify your problem as an emergency?"

The Nancy-thing snickered, thumping up the stairs.

THEY NEVER LET YOU FORGET

I think there's something wrong with me, Doctor," the man in the gray suit said. "It's my little girl. Whenever I look at her ... I swear she's somebody else."

A note was scribbled, a long one by the sounds of the rapid pencil strokes. The man in the gray suit squirmed, wincing as his temples throbbed.

"Tell me, Mr. Brooks," said Dr. Lonnigan, tapping the pencil thoughtfully on her notepad. "Who do you suppose your daughter is?"

Richard Brooks took a deep breath, his first in a week of continuous exasperation. "I-I think she's somebody dead."

He couldn't see the psychiatrist and that was how he wanted it. He lay on a traditional sofa facing an impressive wall of diplomas and a glass bookcase full of leather volumes, unwilling to deal with the critique in anyone's face right now, even one sculpted to reveal professional indifference. But he could feel Dr. Lonnigan's frown anyway, like a blast of heat on the top of his head, and knew what she must think of him. Madness or

not—and what else could it be?—this was about his daughter, and getting this bit of bad business off his chest would be a relief.

"Dead?" inquired the doctor.

"That's what I said, isn't it?" he snapped. He relaxed his tense shoulders, regained control, and went on in a gentler voice: "The vision I'm seeing reminds me of somebody I once knew a long time ago. A young woman named Amanda Bridgton. She was beautiful, and an intern at my firm. I saw her everyday and couldn't keep my ... *thoughts* ... off of her. One thing led to another as they always do, and soon we were burning the midnight oil."

"Why do you think you see Amanda when you look at your daughter?"

His jaw tightened. "I don't know how or why ... it just started last week. The babysitter had already put Mary to bed, and I went in to check on her. Something in the house felt different, and I was self-conscious the whole way up to her room. It was something about the darkness, I think, but don't ask me what. I'm an investment banker and my instinct is for numbers, not the paranormal. Nevertheless, I had a feeling I was being watched. So I checked Mary's room, and when I opened the door I saw, in the moonlight—" he shuddered, "I saw Amanda, my ex-lover, lying there with her arms open to me, looking as seductive as she had the last time I saw her alive. Four years ago, tonight."

"Halloween," noted Dr. Lonnigan.

"Yes, Halloween."

"Why do you think you're having these

hallucinations now, Mr. Brooks?"

"I broke it off with Amanda when I couldn't go on rationalizing our affair, when the guilt of cheating on my wife was becoming so overwhelming that I couldn't even look her in the eyes anymore. Katherine accused me one night of infidelity, and I almost broke down and confessed. But I held on to the secret, and made a vow to myself to never see Amanda again. I mean, it was crazy, all of it, I used to make love to Amanda right in my own house! In the bed I'd slept in for twelve years with Katherine! I couldn't keep up living two lives."

"Do you love your wife?" asked Dr. Lonnigan.

The question startled him. For the briefest of seconds he flashed back to that night with Katherine, when she was hunched over on their bed crying, devastated by the secrets she knew he was keeping from her.

"Katherine is dead," Richard said quietly.

Feelings of despair, self-loathing, and loneliness roiled in his stomach. He knew he needed Katherine—like all men need a companion who shares in their successes and comforts them through their failures—but he hadn't loved her the way she loved him. Hers was a heart of pure and unflagging devotion, unlike his, which was compartmentalized into little black boxes of sin.

"How did it happen?" she asked. Brooks thought he heard in her tone a hint of accusation, but he couldn't be sure.

"Amanda," he said, "came over some time in the evening. I wasn't home from work yet. She must have been distraught; I'd just broken up with her the night

before, told her I never wanted to see her again. She" –his chest hitched with a sob— "killed Katherine. Stabbed her with a carving knife over and over again. Left her in a pool of blood with a message smeared on our bedroom wall: *I'm taking him back*. Thank God my daughter was over at a friend's house trick-or-treating that night, or she would have probably been killed too."

Dr. Lonnigan scribbled furiously, stopped, tapped the pencil on the pad of paper. "What about Amanda?"

What was there to say? Sickeningly, Brooks longed for her when he found her still in the house, upstairs lying nude in his daughter's bed, spatters of his wife's blood drying on her forearms. An urge to go to her, to lie with her, to ravage her right there and then, with the murder still fresh in the air, swept over him. He resisted it, however, and demanded she get dressed. He told her he was calling the police, and that she was the sickest bitch he had ever known, and would suffer for what she did.

"We fought," Brooks continued, getting his emotions back under control. "She said she wasn't going to be arrested for doing what I should have done already. I didn't know it, but she still had the knife under her thigh, and she brought it out and rushed me with it. I put up my arms protectively and she sliced my forearm. I think she was going for my neck, but I can't be sure. I got hold of Amanda from behind—that exquisite body I'd held in almost equally violent passion countless times—and lifted her up and threw her down on the bed. I turned to run out of the room when I heard her scream. The knife had stuck in her stomach, and the wound was

gushing blood. She begged me for help. 'Please, Richard, you know you love me and can't stand to see me die this way. Not the woman you truly want.' And the thing of it was, she was right; I *did* want her, but she was a murderer now and I wasn't about to be a conspirator.

"Later on, the D.A. tried to pin both killings on me, but my alibi for Katherine's murder was airtight and the grand jury wouldn't indict. I stood over Amanda and watched her die that night, heartbroken and delighted at the same time to be finally free. I loved her, but I love my freedom a hell of a lot more."

He glanced at his watch. The session only had five minutes left in it, and he realized he hadn't gotten the advice he'd driven across Manhattan to get.

"What about it, Doctor? What can I do to stop these visions from happening to me?" He thought maybe he told too much, especially to a female psychologist. What would she think of him now? His palms sweated and he wiped them on his pants. There was an anxious flow of energy racing through him, but not the sort that pumped through him when a high-roller sashayed into his office and gave him millions to invest any way he saw fit.

Finally she spoke, but without the gravity or the sermon he expected. "Your case fascinates me, Mr. Brooks." He waited for something more to be said, but she was quiet a long time.

"Before I give my opinion," she finally added, "I have one more question: Has Mary seen or heard anything?"

"You mean has she seen the ghost?"

"Precisely."

Brooks thought about it. "I think so. I told her four years ago, when she was eight, that her mother had died in an accident. But she's older now and last week, when the hallucinations started, I told her the truth."

"How did she take it?"

"She was totally calm about it."

"What did she say to you, Mr. Brooks?"

Brooks squeezed his eyes shut, tears wetting his lashes. If he lost control now, that would be it, his sanity snapped like a Ritz cracker.

"It wasn't so much what she *said* it was what she wouldn't tell me."

"What wouldn't she tell you, Mr. Brooks?"

His little girl's plain and earnest face appeared to him across the shadowy span of memory. "She whispered to me, 'I already know, Dad. Mom tells me in dreams. She's very, very mad at you.' Am I crazy for believing my daughter when she says she's talked to my dead wife?"

Another span of time elapsed where Brooks thought Dr. Lonnigan had possibly fallen asleep, or wandered out of the room unbeknownst to him. He waited patiently, without getting up, feeling utterly ashamed he had even come here. What would his colleagues at the firm think if they knew? He knew one thing for certain: he'd be canned in a heartbeat. The only job he'd be able to get on the Street after that would be as a shoe-shine boy.

"Relax, Mr. Brooks. I have good news. There's nothing for you to worry about—at least not in the physical realm—that we can't sort out with a few sessions of therapy. Your hallucinations are most likely stress-

based. People sometimes see things that aren't there and usually there is a logical explanation, because what the mind and the eyes deem as reality are often two different things. There is a high degree of guilt we're dealing with here, and that can manifest itself in a number of ways. Anxiety, for one. Bottom line, I don't think you're crazy. And these so-called apparitions you've been seeing have no more power to hurt you than a breeze has of knocking down the Eiffel Tower." He heard her stand up, the wheels of a desk chair squeaking. "I'd like to see you again next week. I'll teach you how to deal with these episodes and channel these emotions positively. Our session today is over, Mr. Brooks."

He found he couldn't pry his eyes off the ceiling or lift his body from the couch. A weird species of terror had sunk into his bones while he'd been lying on the sofa, like a wet concrete beginning to harden in his veins. For the past hour he had wanted nothing more than to leave. Now he had a thought—crazy and possibly dangerous but no more so than the delusions he'd been having lately—that when he turned around Dr. Lonnigan wouldn't be there. Instead, he'd find some grotesquery leering at him, a certain acquaintance of his back from the grave, eyeing him hungrily.

Brooks sat up slowly, his lower back muscles popping, and listened to his neck creak as he looked behind him. Relieved, he let the air out of his lungs in an audible *whoosh*.

Dr. Lonnigan—Judy or Julie, he couldn't remember her first name—smiled warmly at him. He was surprised by the sincerity in her expression, and by the

fact she didn't seem outwardly bothered by his tale. She was young, thirtyish, still prime and very pretty, and he allowed himself a split-second fantasy of burying his face in her long almond-colored hair and kissing the nape of her neck. Brooks stood up to his full six-two height, straightened his suit, and extended his hand to her.

"Thank you, Dr. Lonnigan. Next week will be fine."

"I'll look forward to it."

She'll look forward to it. What did that mean? Could she actually be attracted to him, messed up like this, hallucinating? Arousal stirred within him. For a brief but glorious moment, he felt like his old self again, the carousing lady killer who once swept the hottest intern in the office off her feet. He hadn't hit on a woman since the day Katherine died. He missed the feeling, missed those uninhibited days of doing what he wanted to whom he wanted, without his conscience getting in the way. He wanted to go back to those days, grow old and die on his own terms—and what's more, Brooks didn't want to hear it may be wrong. If he couldn't stop the hauntings, he would rationalize them, categorize and label them as excess baggage, and dump them off someplace deep in his mind where not even a shrink and her damnable notepad could find them.

Screw 'em all ... that would be his new maxim. It made him feel better already. Richard Brooks, self-styled man, straightened his tie and strode lightly out of Dr. Lonnigan's office. He had made up his mind—he wasn't going to live in fear anymore. Dr. Lonnigan was right:

hallucinations couldn't hurt him because they weren't real in the first place.

I'm damn near walking on air. He didn't know how Dr. Lonnigan did it, but she was worth every penny of her two-hundred an hour fee.

He approached the secretary at the end of the hall as she was typing on her computer. Pretty face. *Smile at her, Brooks, show her you were only here for a quick tune up, not one of your regular nutjobs.* He would chat her up, he decided, nothing major. Just small talk of the sort you make when you're bored and killing time.

"Excuse me," he said. "Dr. Lonnigan would like me to make another appointment."

The secretary looked up at him and smiled. He mumbled something about business taking up much of his time as he scrolled through his Blackberry, pretending to check his calendar and see what he had available. He wouldn't be coming back to Dr. Lonnigan again. What was the point? She'd told him everything he wanted—and expected—to hear.

While she checked her computer, Brooks told her about his job at Goldman Sachs. She shared that her name was Emily, she was going to law school—"I could *never* be a shrink," she confided, "but don't tell Dr. Lonnigan!"—and was looking forward to the Paul Simon concert at Madison Square Garden tomorrow night. As she talked, his eyes flicked over to the coffee mug next to her keyboard. It read: MISTAKES HAVE BEEN MADE, OTHERS WILL BE BLAMED. He smiled. *That's my kind of gal*, he thought. No emotional baggage, just roll with the

punches. That's who he was too, or at least the way he wanted to be.

"Excuse me for asking," he said, flashing his baby blues, "but I was wondering if you might be available for dinner tonight. There's a new sushi bar just opened up on Fifth—"

The phone cut him off. Emily giggled and held up her index finger. *Hold that thought, Loverboy.* While she was distracted by the phone, he helped himself to a peek down her blouse. Black bra, probably matching panties. Nice. An image flashed before his eyes, Emily bent over his glass top desk at work, her tight little cocktail dress hiked up to her waist, Paul Simon crooning on the radio while he nailed her right there under the portrait of CEO Lloyd Blankfein. Just like Amanda all those years ago. Ah, Lloyd, if only your portrait could talk, what tales of conquest it would tell!

"Yes, of course," Emily was saying, a hard edge creeping into her voice. "He's right here. Would you like to speak to him? Certainly. And whom may I say is calling? Of course, one moment please."

The secretary shot Brooks a withering look. "Looks like dinner will have to wait," she said, handing him the phone. "It's your wife on line one."

THE WIND BREATHES COLD

Martin Hilliard eased his car over to the side of the road and cut the engine. He listened to his breathing in the stillness, a ragged sound reminding him he wasn't young anymore, and the years were slipping by quickly. He stared out the fogged window at the narrow dirt path overgrown with weeds and brush. Dry wind strummed the trees. The grass and the weeds swayed.

For hours he'd driven north along the scorched stretch of highway to his parents' house. As he drew closer to town, the sky glazed over with threatening clouds. His mouth filled with the metallic tang of rain. The temperature dropped quickly, and with the sudden change came a darkening of his mood.

Down there, Martin thought with a shudder. He hadn't been here since he was a boy, but the memories he was reliving weren't pleasant. In fact, they were downright horrific.

He received the newspaper clipping from his mother four days ago. Two old friends from his school days (acquaintances, really) died recently, and the reason,

speculated the locals, was lurking somewhere in the dense forest of firs and spruce. Of course it was utter nonsense, all of it, the rumors of ghosts having anything to do with the men's deaths. But for provincial folks, superstitious causes were often the first to be believed.

He was beginning to wonder about his own motivations for coming back here. What did he hope to accomplish? He didn't get to where he was today, a respectable if not exactly wealthy businessman, by subscribing to arcane ideas only a fanatic would believe. And yet he couldn't shake the inexplicable feeling that something brought him back to this place, by killing the only other people who'd participated in the dreadful misfortune of a long-ago October day.

But if the deed he committed in these woods as a boy was in any way connected to the recent deaths, then shouldn't he have a look? Didn't he at least owe his friends—whom he turned his back on when he bolted to a college on the other side of the country—that much? Besides, a little side trip down memory lane wouldn't hurt. Memories were merely chemical reactions in the brain. Cells swapping signals back and forth. Whatever memory he happened to resurrect while he was down there wouldn't harm him in the least.

It would be more harmful, he figured, if he drove away and let the curiosity eat him alive.

He stubbed out his cigarette and climbed out of the Honda, picking his way down the threaded path into the cool interior of the woods. Mosquitoes whined about his head, landing every few seconds on his sweaty face, and he waved and swatted at them. He gulped air, feeling

at any moment like he might faint. He really needed to exercise more, he thought. He shouldn't be getting this tired this *quickly*, with so little exertion.

He stopped and leaned his considerable bulk against the trunk of a massive tree. He dug in his pocket for the newspaper clipping and read it again. Adam Peterson and Josh Tompkins, each experienced hunters, each hale and hearty men in their forties familiar with the dangers of the forest, were found lying side by side in the weeds—ashen and terror-stricken—clutching hunting rifles fired repeatedly at no apparent target. No sign of animal attack was evident, and no physical wounds were found. A heart attack was the ruling in both cases, according to the coroner's report. With that unusual conclusion followed a spike of sightings of phantom shapes, bobbing lights, and strange mists in the woods. Two apparently healthy men suddenly struck down by the same malady at the same moment? A paranormal explanation was the only kind that made sense, suggested the writer, with the sort of puerile giddiness that sold newspapers and titillated the simple- minded.

Martin shuddered again, though he barely felt the cold. They were just as guilty as he. Both were with him on the day it happened eighteen years ago. What attacked his two old friends out here? For one anxious moment he wanted to go back to his car, for just then he felt the wind shift and change, breathe colder, and howl like a tormented prisoner. There was indeed something amiss about this place, in the melancholy clinging to the blowing fields like a morning fog, in the edgy stillness underscoring all of it.

The trail he followed bended through a stand of knotty pines. In moments he would be at the house that sulked like a scorned child beneath the damp shade of the trees. All he could think about was the little grave in back, and how urgent it suddenly became to touch the soil and let it crumble between his fingers. Rest a palm against the cold, unbroken surface of the grave. Only then could he be assured its occupant hadn't risen to haunt the living.

The foliage shuddered fitfully in the stiffening breeze. Here Martin felt Toby, his essence in the trees, his breath in the wind. The sensation of being watched stole over him. He could feel the air thicken with an approaching storm. In response, his chest tightened painfully, and his lungs worked harder than ever to supply oxygen to his weary body. Without warning, the image of the frail little boy appeared in his mind. Toby, with clumps of thinning hair on a huge, misshapen head. Toby and his shimmering eyes, studying him closely in his dreams, like those of a thief glaring covetously at a prize. What was the prize? His soul? Martin wouldn't give it to him, though he probably owed Toby that much, if not more.

A victim of cruel mistreatment by children, Toby never attended school or church, and languished instead in his dismal house with his sallow-skinned mother looking out for his needs. Sitting and watching out his smeared little window as the days and the months drifted by with gray indifference. And then it all changed, the day an adolescent Martin and his friends showed up at his doorstep...

Twigs snapped ahead, followed by malicious laughter.

Martin strained to see the source of the laughter through the dense foliage before him. It sounded like children ... and why not? Didn't Martin, Adam and Josh used to find amusement down here all the time? They, too, ignored the old legends of ghosts, and came here to play and harass Toby.

He swept the branches aside just as a light rain began pattering the leaves. His heart pounded like the heavy knocks of a solemn midnight caller. This is crazy, he thought. He wasn't the sort to become so easily afraid, but this place unnerved him to the point of making him want to run away. Why should he be so afraid of children and their games?

Thunk-thunk.

He crept forward, not wanting to frighten but to spy. In a clearing littered with brown needles and patches of short, dead grass, the simple frame house crouched in the middle of a vast spread of spruce and maple trees, awash in gray light. Two boys stood in the clearing, looking up at the house. Two large windows on the ground floor stared obliquely into the gloom. In one, the pane was still intact; in the other two, shards of dirty glass glinted like broken teeth. Creeper vines sprawled up from the earth and entwined themselves around the sagging floorboards of the porch.

The taller of the two boys picked up a handful of stones and chucked them at the house. *Thunk-thunk-thunk.* Martin watched as they ricocheted harmlessly off the peeling clapboard walls and bounced onto the ground.

The shorter boy stooped to pick up a large rock the size of Martin's fist, and cocked his arm back to throw it.

Forced by a strong yet inexplicable compulsion, Martin rushed out from his hiding spot and shouted at the boys to stop. At their age he had done much worse ... why should he scorn them? He didn't know, and what's more: he didn't feel in conscious control of his own actions.

At the sound of Martin's call, the boys spun around in unison and fixed him with cold, menacing stares. The anger on the younger boy's face morphed into outrage as Martin grabbed his arm and yanked it backward. For a boy who appeared no older than ten, his shoulders were bunched and powerful, and he was able to wrestle the stone away from Martin.

The other boy was reed-thin, with brown hair whipping across his squinty face in the rising wind. *Josh,* Martin thought incredulously. The resemblance was uncanny. And the younger boy—so much like Adam. It could be just his imagination, but maybe he was being given a second chance to set things right. If so, there was no time to spare.

He gathered himself in time before they could run. "Put the rock down—"

... Thunk-thunk.

"Put the rock down? " Josh said, towering over Martin. "Who do you think you're talking to? You dared me in the first place! I ought to make you throw it, chicken shit. "

Thunk ... thunk.

"Adam, stop it! "

The younger boy's expression froze in bewilderment as the stone he hurled struck the roof and skittered into the gutter with a shrill clatter.

"What's wrong, Marty?"

He didn't know for sure. Nobody was supposed to be in the house. Hadn't they seen Toby's mother go into town earlier that morning? Certainly wherever she went she brought her son, since he couldn't be trusted in his condition to care for himself alone. He shouldn't have been home without his mother.

But in an upstairs window Martin saw something stir the curtain.

Could Toby really be in there? By himself? *Martin wanted so badly to prove himself to the two older boys, to belong to the popular older crowd at school, but he didn't want to hurt Toby. Why would his mother leave him alone? What was she thinking?*

"You throw it," ordered Adam, shoving the rock into Martin's hand. Malice glittered in his eyes.

The rock felt weighty, at least three pounds, grainy and slick with rain. It molded to his hand; he was sure he could throw it fifty yards if he tried. But he only needed twenty. Twenty to clear the overhang of the porch; twenty to smash right through the filmy glass and send the message home that Martin Hilliard and his buddies weren't going to tolerate freaks. He would probably be a hero. And eventually, the guilt would go away. That's what Adam always said—guilt is temporary, glory lasts a lifetime.

Besides, it was Martin's idea in the first place. How could he back down?

He pumped his arm a couple of times to loosen it up,

never taking his eyes off the second story window. Suddenly, the curtain parted ever so slightly, and two bright, hopeful eyes peered out. Maybe there are kids here to play with me, Martin knew he was thinking. He hesitated. He understood the boy's loneliness, as he was himself new to his school and the town. But no matter how pathetic Toby was, he was still just a retarded kid who nobody gave a damn about. Who would care—except his mother, of course—if something happened to him?

Martin tossed the rock with a grunt, watching it sail toward the boy and his disfigured face in the window. Glass shattered into a million pieces like a horde of diamonds scattered by violent winds.

A scream arose from the house, a scream of such agony and despair that it made all three boys turn and run away. The scream was lifted on the keening wind, carried to the remotest parts of the forest, and followed the boys back to the road. Even on their bikes, even pedaling as fast as they could all the way home, even as they lay their heads on their pillows and tried to fall asleep, the scream was always there. It seared itself onto Martin's soul, and rejected the efforts of time to silence it. Even today, after all these years, he still heard the scream, and remembered...

"Here," the older boy said, looking askance at Martin as though afraid he might suddenly pull a gun or something. He dropped the stone into Martin's outstretched hand. "Take it. We didn't mean nothin' by it. Just havin' a little fun."

A little fun.

Martin shook his head to clear his thoughts. The two boys exchanged a nervous glance before turning and rushing off into the woods. He listened to their rude voices mock him before the sounds disappeared in the steadily falling rain. After the boys vanished, he looked down at the rock. *I'm not a kid anymore*, he admonished himself. It was August, 2011. *Why are you still beating yourself up over this?* He didn't know, but something had a *grip* on him here. He could feel its fingers squeezing his throat. Its palpable presence watched him from every corner of the forest.

Martin dropped the stone and circled around to the back of the house. He found the sunken grave set back about fifty feet from the house, along with, surprisingly, a wooden cross hand-fashioned from two oak planks tied together by leather straps. A pauper's grave, he thought with a twinge of sadness, the only thing Toby's poor mother could afford. The cross didn't appear very old, however, and Martin wondered if somebody was coming back regularly to tend the grave. Or pay their respects. Adam and Josh? Maybe they never forgot. And maybe whatever got them—if indeed it came from another, darker place—resented their presence at the grave, and laid in wait for the right time to strike.

Nonsense. Now he was getting carried away with himself. He had to stop, before someone found *him* out here lying stiff as a board in the weeds and gawping up at the leaden sky. Only it wouldn't be a ghost that got him—it'd be a clean break from reality that did him in.

Martin studied the simple grave for a moment, the slight cylindrical indentation in the ground, and was

actually stunned nobody had defiled it or dug it up by now, if for no other reason than to see what a deformed skeleton looked like. No doubt it was the protective aura of superstition surrounding this house that kept the grave safe from vandals.

Except it didn't stop those teenagers you just chased away, he thought. *But you already know plenty about that.*

But was it really superstition? Martin felt the energy of the place as he stood there before the grave, an electrical charge coming from not just the brewing storm but the very earth itself. He glanced at the backs of his arms and saw goosebumps popping out. A faint buzzing in his ears he was trying to ignore grew shrill and persistent.

What had he come all the way out here to say anyway? Words failed him. There were never any suitable words in the first place, he realized. He felt solemn, as though he stood above the bones of a fallen idol, not someone whom he teased and bullied right up to the final moments of his life. He crossed himself anyway, but felt no comfort in the gesture. Just a motion he knew was supposed to be done at times like these. Why should he care about Toby and the grave anyway? The whole thing was just a careless, freak accident. He was only thirteen, for God's sake, and didn't deserve the crushing guilt and self-recrimination he was piling on himself.

The rain began falling with renewed urgency, pasting his clothes to his skin and his thinning hair to his scalp. He was too far from the car to bother going back, so instead he ran to the house, bounding up the three swaybacked steps to the backdoor. The door was unlocked, and he opened it and slipped inside, saying a

silent prayer of thanks for careless caretakers who could give a damn about property damage.

Actually, from the looks of it inside, it was doubtful anyone had looked in on the old place for years. The house had been left to its own devices for too long, and was now rotting away. Most of the white walls were peeling from moisture damage and, in some places, turning a dull shade of gray. Martin knew he could probably push his thumb right through certain areas of the wall if he tried, but the house overall seemed sturdy enough to take in one more visitor without falling to pieces. His curiosity piqued, Martin started exploring the creaky darkness.

First, he came to a living room, or a sitting room of some kind. Withered husks of saffron and scarlet leaves lay scattered around the floor, the litter of countless autumns. Martin wandered through the empty rooms of the house, listening to the storm beat like a restless animal on the roof, and moan through all the cracks and crevices of the walls.

The air felt at least twenty degrees cooler in the house, and a chill ran down his back. He found an old lantern on a shelf in the kitchen, and a box of sodden matches in a drawer. It took him five attempts to find one that would burn.

The glow from the lantern cast his face in an eerie sheen. He almost didn't recognize himself as he passed in front of a mirror. *I've become one of them*, he thought. A murderer who comes back to the spot of his damnation, reliving the butchery and his victim's suffering all over again.

Only that's not why I'm here. It's the storm, I had to seek shelter. Where else could I have gone?

A convenient lie. Killers had plenty of those, too.

He pushed the depressing parallel out of his mind. He was not a homicidal maniac, he was just a guy with a past. Lots of people had them. Some can shake the influence and move on with their lives; others had a lot more to be accountable for. Just because he happened to fall into the latter category, that didn't necessarily make him a bad person. Or did it?

Don't answer that.

He didn't.

Martin found a decrepit set of stairs and started climbing. A feeling of calm and comfort settled over him, as though the house was warming to him. He moved with purpose, but what purpose that was he didn't know. He stopped at the threshold of one of the upstairs bedrooms. Sheets of rain slanted in through the shattered glass. An oil-dark stain on the threadbare carpet lay at the base of the window. Martin couldn't take his eyes off of it. Feeling a mixture of revulsion and curiosity, he started moving toward it, unaware of what he was doing. His mind was clouding again, his thoughts returning to the past ...

... *where he was standing at the window and looking out in astonishment. Boys from town—boys his own age!—were coming through the clearing toward his house. He jumped up and down in the middle of his bedroom and clapped his hands joyfully. Friends! They must have been coming to play with him.*

He returned to the window and secretly watched them through the part in the curtains. They were coming closer. He should go down and greet them, invite them into his home and share some of his mother's fresh baked gingerbread cookies with them, and then they could dance and play in the rain, in the cleansing rain, in the "tears of Heaven," as Mother called them. Maybe Heaven would no longer cry for him. Maybe he would be all right now. He couldn't help how he looked. It wasn't fair nobody liked him. But maybe these three boys would be different from the other ones, the ones who came before and yelled and teased him and called him such yucky names. Toby's heart swelled with hope. He pushed the curtain aside to see his new friends better.

They stopped just short of the porch. Why didn't they come to the door? One of the boys picked something off the ground and threw it, a rock. Toby heard it skip off the roof with a hollow knock and crash in the gutter. The other boy threw stones too, which sounded like large chunks of hail hitting the walls and windows.

Then they were arguing. Toby strained to hear their words. What kind of a game were they playing? Whatever it was, Mother wouldn't approve. She didn't like throwing stones. They could hurt people. He wanted to go down and talk to them, tell them to just come inside, but something held him back. The look in the older one's eyes. Cold and dark, like Mother's when he was very, very bad.

The older one passed a large rock to the smallest boy, the one Toby thought looked the nicest. But then something changed in the boy's expression. One moment he was staring uneasily at the rock in his hand, the next he was glaring up at Toby with hatred. The boy raised the jagged rock, pulled it

back behind his head, and flung it at the window. Toby's mouth opened in a scream. The rock smashed through the window, spraying shards of glass all over his face like a rain of knives.

Toby fell to his knees, clutching his bleeding face and screaming. He would not forget—not ever forget—the pain and violation and the face of the boy who threw the stone. All he wanted, as he slumped to the floor, was to feel his mother hold him again and hear her sing one of her sweet lullabies. But Mother would not be back for a while. In fact, he would never see her again.

Death on that cold and rainy October day eighteen years ago was slow in coming. While the wind screamed through the window, death, like the children, taunted Toby and prolonged his agony. But then it faded away, the pain and the sounds and the terrible weight of his own broken and disfigured body, and Toby felt himself carried off to a different place altogether.

A place where no one could hurt him anymore.

A place of infinitely more power.

Martin stumbled back from the window.

The link to the past broken, he cast his gaze about the abandoned house, momentarily forgetting how he'd gotten there. He touched a hand to his cheek. He still *felt* the gashes made from the splintered glass. He expected to see blood on his fingertips, but there was nothing there. He understood now what Toby had gone through. He *experienced* it firsthand, exactly the way it had happened. His heart ached with sorrow. If he could, he would take it all back, but such a thing was impossible. Just like Toby,

Martin was tied to this moment forever. One way or another, he would have to see it through. He had no choice, did he? He deserved it.

He stepped up to the window. Something rattled the bushes down by the edge of the clearing, where Martin had emerged earlier. A gray, lumpish shape stood veiled by the trees, but Martin knew who it was. And what he was there for. Martin waited, his breath rattling in his lungs, every muscle in his body taut.

When the child stepped forward, he was holding a rock.

A rock aimed right for Martin.

"Oh, God, no!"

It was too late to pull back, too late—

He dropped the lantern as the rock struck him square in the chest and sent him reeling backwards onto the floor. Glass sliced through his skin, and blood fanned out beneath him. Martin struggled to his feet, grimacing in pain, and saw the flame from the tipped lantern feeding ravenously on the old carpet and spreading quickly to the hardwood floor and walls.

Fanned by the wind, the fire soon grew into a conflagration, with billows of black smoke choking the air. He lunged for the front door before the smoky haze could conceal it from him forever. He bolted down the stairs and across the house, his chest throbbing where the rock hit him, his heart pounding in rapid, searing beats.

Staggering outside, he fell to his knees, exhausted and coughing. The first blue shadows of night spilled from the forest. Thunder pealed overhead, as phantoms of slate-colored smoke drifted past him.

Forcing his exhausted legs to obey, he got up and pursued the obscure shape he noticed in the shadowy cluster of spruce and fir.

"Toby?" his voice cracked.

The fire cackled behind him.

Have you gone mad? shrieked his thoughts. *There's no one there!*

Wasn't there? Then who threw the rock? He was sick of arguing with himself now. He knew—finally *believed* for the first time in eighteen years—that he was not alone out here or anywhere else for that matter, and never was. Toby had always been with him. The difference was, now he was both inside and *outside* of Martin's mind.

A hideous scream erupted behind him.

Martin turned back to the house and stared in horror as a small boy appeared in the corner of the smashed upstairs window, the inferno raging around him, orange and yellow light shimmering off Toby's pale skin. His eyes locked on Martin's, all the fury and helplessness transferring into Martin's soul. He screamed and clawed at his own body, ripping the wounds open wider, feeling Toby burning inside him.

Dear God, what have I done? What did I let happen to Adam and Josh?

Martin stumbled backwards. Tripped on a protruding root. Struck the ground without realizing it, kicked his legs in the mud, managed to gain distance by inches. But it was not enough. An arm of fire exploded through the window, out over the porch in a spray of sparks, unfurling its flaming fingers and groping the empty

air, reaching across time and space for the boy who threw the stone. The fingers found their mark, reaching deep into Martin's mind and withdrawing with his sanity in tow.

Martin turned and ran for the darkness.

The path seemed to go on forever.

THE THING IN THE WOODS

We found it in the woods behind my house. Actually, it was Austin who tripped over it and did a face plant in the dirt. It sat under an ash tree, black and steaming like some weird volcanic rock belched out of the earth only seconds before. It shined, it sparkled, but all of its surfaces were smooth and flat and opaque. It moved, it *stirred*, even as it sat among the weeds. It fixated us. It was everything boys like us dreamed of finding in their forays into the woods. All the treasure in the world in one place, in one odd *thing*. And it was a nightmare, a strange, beckoning nightmare, a horror for which we had no answer—or response, except to stare.

"What is it?" Justin's question shattered our reverie.

"I don't..." I started to answer, but couldn't find my tongue. "HellifIknow," I spat out as a single syllable.

Austin stood up and brushed the leaves and mud off his jeans. "Why does it ... look like that?" he said.

"Is it alive?" Justin wanted to know.

We crept up to it for a better look.

The rock, for I had no better word to describe it, seemed to shrink and expand imperceptibly, as though it

drew quick, shallow breaths. Its angles and lines became curves and edges became plains and corners. Shadows and sunlight playing tricks? That wasn't the answer, for the sun was hidden behind a slab of clouds, and the wind was lying still and silent.

Something else, then.

The thing before us eyed us back, though it had no eyes nor head nor any appendages of a living thing. Yet living is what it was, living and watching and *waiting.* As though it had been there a thousand years. Or a million. Waiting for *us.*

"What do we do with it?" Justin asked.

"What can we do?" Austin replied, and then reached out to poke it. "It's hot!" He jerked his hand away.

Justin stuck out his own hand and touched it. "Freezing," he said matter-of-factly. "Like ice."

Both of them turned to look at me.

"What do we do with it, Mike?" asked Austin, sucking his wounded fingers.

It was a fair question. My family owned the woods, at least fifty acres of it. The rock was on my land. It made sense that it fell on me to make a decision. Only I wanted no part of it. No part of the thing, the rock, or whatever it was. No part of this whole wasted day. My stomach hurt and bile kept bubbling up into my throat as my eyes strained to focus on the thing's constantly churning surface.

"Kill it," I decided.

We stared at the rock.

Austin had his slingshot with him. We all did. We were out in the woods looking for squirrels to paste when we'd found the rock. He pulled back and launched a sharp-edged stone. He was only three feet away. He never should have missed. But the missile sliced harmlessly into the tall grass behind the thing, which had somehow shifted positions in the blink of an eye to avoid the contact.

"Did you see that?" he breathed.

We had. Christ Almighty.

Justin fired a shot. Same result. It moved with incredible speed. The thing was now at least twelve inches from the spot where we'd originally found it, quivering, gleaming, *smirking* at us. I don't know why I thought that, but somehow I knew the rock was mocking us. *Daring* us.

"It won't work," I said, sighing. "It's been waiting."

"For what?" asked Justin.

"For us."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know."

"So what do we do with it?" Austin repeated, his voice rising in alarm.

"Leave it," Justin said quickly, backing up a step. "Bury it. Burn it where it lies."

A sudden urge told me to pick it up. I was thirteen; how could I resist? Boys my age had urges all the time, usually about girls, but this one was different. This one was coming from the rock.

"Let's take it with us."

My friends looked at me stupidly.

"What do you mean, take it with us?" Austin was almost in hysterics. "What for? C'mon, Mike, what are you going to do with it? I mean, it freaks me out."

"I don't know yet." I walked up to it and placed my own hands on it. Nothing. Cool, like any other rock. I felt a thrumming vibration deep below the grainy surface of the thing, however, as though energy cells were heating up.

"Help me," I called over my shoulder. The bitch was heavy. Though the rock was no larger than a bowling ball, it felt heavier and incredibly denser than any rock I'd held before, and my back muscles were protesting.

"Let's take it to my house," I said.

Fortunately, no one was home. My mother had taken my four-year-old brother, Cody, to the park. Dad was at work. We lugged the rock into the living room and set it down slowly, so it wouldn't crash through the floor. Then we all sat around it, Indian style, chiefs planning battle strategy, planning for what might happen next. My heart roared in my chest. I couldn't lift my eyes from it, from the subtle and ever-changing patterns in the rock.

MMMiiiiikkkeee. Only my imagination.

Or so I told myself.

"How much do you think we can get for it?" Austin's question. I looked at him. When you're a kid you ask dumb questions, dream stupid dreams, and wish for things that could never happen. Who the hell would want to pay for this? I asked him.

"A collector of some sort," he mumbled, shaking his head.

"Of some sort," Justin whispered.

The rock, breathing, waited.

I felt I had to ask the question I knew was on all of our minds. "I wonder what it can do."

Austin perked up. "You mean, like, its powers or something?"

"I'll bet it has some," I said. "I could *feel* something inside that rock when I was carrying it in. Energy waves, or something."

"Maybe it's a meteorite." Justin knew about that stuff; his dad was a science professor at the local university.

I smiled. This didn't come from outer space. Or if it did, it wasn't just a piece of cosmic scrap metal left over from a forming planet. It was almost ... intelligent. *Almost.* I sensed not a complex brain, exactly, but a desire to live, perhaps to *feed*. That last thought drove a spike of fear through my body. I immediately put a stop to my thoughts and shut the voice up in my head.

"It's no meteorite," I said firmly. "I think it came from here."

"The woods."

I glanced up at Justin when he said it. "Not the woods. The woods were where we found it. I think it came from the earth, or somewhere in the earth."

"Where?" Austin looked over at me desperately. He thought I knew everything. We'd only had the rock for less than a half hour. I knew nothing ... except what the thing kept muttering in my thoughts.

"I don't know."

That shut him up for a while.

Time passed. The surface of the rock, the *object,* whatever you want to call it—how do you name such a thing?—flowed without moving, surged without motion. Behind me a cold, wet touch on the back of my neck made me jump. Our tabby, Mewler, was curiously nosing around us. She stopped in mid-stride when she saw the rock and froze. The tip of her tail started to twitch.

"I wonder what it does," Justin was saying to himself when he, too, noticed the cat.

Then he lunged with incredible speed and scooped up Mewler before I could stop him.

I must not have been the only one in communication with the thing. Justin placed the cat gently on top of the rock. At first nothing happened. Mewler lifted her nose and sniffed the air. We remained still, breathless, gawping at the cat. I should've snatched her away. Jesus, why didn't I do it? It was Cody's cat. What would happen if—

Suddenly a trap door on the top of the rock sprang open with a sharp metallic clank, sucking Mewler down inside, bending and twisting her legs at sickening angles and popping her joints out of place. She was drawn down into it in stages, like a python gulping its prey, and in seconds she was gone. The rock made a series of disgusting slurping sounds as it swallowed the cat whole. Blood splattered up into the air and flowed over the sides of the rock. Fortunately, when I looked back on it, I don't think the cat suffered. Mewler's lights were out before she ever knew what happened.

It was several seconds, maybe a full minute, before I realized I was screaming. Somewhere in all the confusion

I must have passed out. When I came to, I had Austin and Justin practically sitting on me. The thing was still on the living room floor, except it had changed. Mewler was back ... only it wasn't her.

The thing stared at us from behind those imperious feline eyes. Not Mewler anymore, but something *alien.* And hungry.

The cat stood still as a statue, only it wasn't still at all. Those crazy geometric patterns still swarmed all over her body, changing colors, shapes, and sizes, making her silky coat ripple as though invisible fingers stroked it in haphazard directions.

"We have to kill it," I sobbed. I loved that damn cat, but now I was thinking about my family and friends. We had to kill it before it came for any of us.

Before it grew large enough to swallow *us* whole.

But just as I thought it, the cat leaped forward and dashed from the room. Her legs made a grinding sound, like rusty gears, as the she fled down the hallway with all of us in close pursuit. She headed for Cody's bedroom, where Miranda, our cocker spaniel, slept during the day.

The cat was lightning quick, and it pounced on Miranda while she slept curled up on the floor. We had no chance to stop what happened next. The cat's mouth cranked open as the rock had, the top of her head falling backward until she stared upside down at us with glassy eyes. Then a series of mechanical-sounding whirrings and buzzings emanated from her chest as it, too, sprang open to reveal a menacing row of glinting, razor-sharp teeth. I stared in horror as the teeth began chugging and spinning, like a circular saw, and sank into the dog's

squishy middle. Gouts of blood erupted in thick waves and painted the walls and ceiling with gore. Clanks and clunks echoed in the thing's belly, like a lawn mower running over branches. The dog was devoured, bones and all, in greedy, wet gulps. Mewler, the *rock*, sat astride it now, sucking down the last sinewy bits of dog meat until nothing remained but a crimson stain on the floor. Miranda didn't even have time to bark. The cat, now so engorged and fattened with meat that it looked once again like a rock with stubby legs poking out (only with a Spaniel's floppy ears and bushy tail), rolled over and let out a belch that filled the room with a fetid, greasy stink.

Beside me, Austin puked all over his shoes. Justin had the shakes so bad I actually heard his teeth chatter.

"Get back!" I screamed, shoving Austin and Justin out into the hallway, and slamming the bedroom door shut behind me. Clutching the knob, I braced for the impact of the thing, but nothing happened. Except for my own ragged breathing and the gasping breaths of my friends, I heard nothing. What was it waiting for? It could break through the flimsy door right now if it wanted. I knew it had just grown bigger and stronger, too, and would soon be coming for us. Why didn't it? What was so special about us?

Nothing, its voice hissed in my head. But while it added nothing more, I had the distinct impression it couldn't attack again. It needed to digest. It was sated.

For now.

I dragged Austin and Justin downstairs with me. We looked for weapons. The basement was large and

overflowing with boxes of crap my parents refused to throw away, most of it stacked in towers resembling a cardboard metropolis of forgotten memories. What was I searching for? A gun? Unlikely I'd find one. My father wasn't a hunter; didn't believe in it. He told me once that he believed in a universe of order. He couldn't accept chaos as a functional part of life.

Neither could I, until I found the thing in the woods.

Austin paced around, no longer looking for a weapon, just wandering aimlessly, scratching his head and waving his arms around.

"Calm down," I told him, but I only agitated him more.

"Did you see what that fucker did up there?" *Fucker.* Now it was out in the open. We were talking about a real living entity.

"Of course we did," Justin said.

"It ate his cat, man. And his fucking cocker spaniel."

"So it did," I said calmly. For the first time since we found the rock, I felt in control of my emotions. I kicked over a few more boxes. Where the hell did my parents keep my old Louisville Slugger?

"I guess we know its powers." Justin slumped against the moldy block wall, exhausted. He looked green, like he was going to be sick.

"We don't know anything about it," I pointed out. A couple more boxes tumbled over, disgorging Christmas memorabilia and sentimental bric-a-brac.

"It needs to die," Justin pointed out uselessly.

"That's why we're here," I said.

"It *needs* to die," Justin repeated, only not to us. He was saying it to himself now, like a mantra, something his mind could hold on to so it wouldn't slip away any farther.

"We'll kill it," I assured him.

Austin came up to me and grabbed my shirt. His gamy breath wafted into my face. "How, smart guy, eh? How do you kill a fucking—whatever the fuck it is? It's a goddamn robot or something, a monster ... a fucking *robot monster*."

"Get a grip on yourself!" I shouted, shoving him back. Austin must have seen something he didn't like in my eyes, because he sank to the floor next to Justin and looked away.

"It'll be all right." I didn't believe a word of it, but at least I sounded tough and convincing. It had to be all right. That thing could not be allowed to leave Cody's room. Alive, that is.

"We need help," Justin said.

"Yeah, from who?" I answered. "The cops? Think they'll believe us? Shithead next to you there has been busted twice in school for marijuana possession, and last year got caught slashing school bus tires. They'll assume we were all jacked up on coke or something and made shit up. And when they find the blood all over the walls—Christ, we'll be done for. They'll drag us to jail for killing the animals. And what'll happen to that *thing* if we're gone, huh? It'll keep on killing, that's what, and its taste for cat and dog won't last for long."

"Did you see it grow?" Justin asked. His voice

sounded distant and detached. "After it ate Mewler? It got bigger."

"And it took her shape," Austin added. He shook his head like he didn't believe his own words. "Fucking *shape shifter.*"

We were silent after that for a few minutes, each of us catching our breaths and thinking. I can't say I was thinking about much. My mind by then was a total blank. But the silence was a blessing. It gave me a chance to scan the basement and look for weapons. Could we beat the thing into some kind of submission while it was still small, wound it enough so we could carry it out of the house? When we got it outside, I knew exactly where I wanted to dump it: in the pond my parents installed last year. We found the rock on dry land; maybe it hated water. Maybe we could drown it. It was worth a try—*if* we had a weapon first.

"It doesn't belong here." Justin's dreamy voice and glazed eyes were starting to spook me. He seemed to be in deep shock.

"What do you mean?"

"My dad makes me read science fiction sometimes," he explained. "Says it'll make me like science class better, but I still hate it. Anyway, ever read *War of the Worlds*?"

"Saw the movie," I said.

"The machines that woke up and started destroying everything—they were already here, buried in the ground for thousands of years. Put there by some race of aliens long time ago. Then one day they just flipped the switch—when it was time to annihilate us."

"Arma*fuckin*geddon," added Austin. I didn't like what I heard in his voice.

"Bullshit," I told Justin.

"Yeah, probably." He shrugged. "But where the hell did that rock come from? What *is* it? No person built a thing like that."

"We don't know that," I said. "We don't know anything about it."

"My dad says the more science teaches us, the less we actually know."

"Well, that's very poetic," I said, "but not very helpful. Have any more insights, Einstein?"

"It talked to me," Justin continued, "and told me to pick up Mewler."

I believed him. No way Justin murders my cat without good reason.

I glanced at Austin. "Has it talked to you yet?"

Austin looked away, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment. Or shame. "Yes. It wanted me to pick it up."

"The rock?"

"*Yes*," he growled, his expression turning dark, "and smash it on your head."

I swallowed hard. It was only a matter of time before one of us snapped. We were close to it already. Justin was spacing out and Austin had a look about him like a drug addict in one of those scared-straight videos they showed us in health class. Like he could murder someone. We had to go back up there, take care of business, but not empty-handed. There had to be something down here I was overlooking—

A broad grin spread across my face. "Anybody for a game of golf?"

I'd spotted my dad's old clubs, shoved back in a corner of the basement behind the sprawling furnace. I hurried over and started pulling them out, one by one, discarding the wooden ones immediately. I settled on three of the irons, giving the five-iron to Justin and the six-iron to Austin. I kept the nine-iron for myself. Thus armed, we stared solemnly at each other one more time and, without another word, marched up the stairs to finish the deed.

As we got near the top, I heard a sound. A muffled scrape, like a chair being pulled back on linoleum. Then footsteps, thumping hollowly somewhere in the house. My heart jack-hammered and my throat sealed shut with dread. I bounded up the remaining stairs and burst through the door—

—and found my mother standing in the kitchen, chopping carrots and singing softly to herself.

"Oh, hello, Michael," she said, smiling. "Are your friends staying for dinner?" Her eyes narrowed curiously when she noticed the golf club held out before me. "Thinking of taking up the sport? Your father would be so proud. He thinks you spend too much time playing video games."

"Jesus, Mom!" I cried, shaking all over, "*where's Cody?*"

"In his room, of course. He couldn't wait to come home and play with Miranda. Why?"

Once when I was eight a hornet stung me on the ass. I was sitting in the middle of a clump of clover, and

the goddamn thing came out of nowhere and plunged its stinger in deep. I howled in agony for a good half hour, and had to sit on bags of ice and frozen peas for the rest of the afternoon. An existential moment for a kid, to say the least. A day where it seemed like the universe could give two shits and a whistle about my personal well-being.

I realized now that the universe was far crueler than I'd ever imagined.

I shot off toward Cody's room, Justin and Austin at my heels, my mother's frantic voice trailing behind us. I ran up to Cody's door. I stopped. I listened. A scuffling sound came from the room, then a low, lilting hum, like a little boy singing to himself. My head buzzed as relief flooded through me. The voice was Cody's. I swallowed a lump in my throat and handed my golf club over to Justin. I didn't want my little brother to be spooked when he saw me. I didn't want to set that thing off and make it feel threatened, either. It must have still been digesting. What must Cody be thinking about all the blood? He wasn't crying, which was good. I decided I was going to calmly get Cody out of there. I was going to do it quickly and quietly, and then I was going to buy him the biggest, fattest ice cream cone he'd ever seen before. Once we drowned that monstrosity in the pond.

I twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

And felt the universe kick sand in my face once again.

Cody stood in the middle of the floor, arms at his sides, head cocked slightly to the left. His expression was serene, his skin pale but not white, not white at all, but shiny and kaleidoscopic with perfectly alien colors

swirling in bright pastel hues. A wet ring of sticky blood encircled his mouth and stained the front of his Curious George T-shirt. His eyes opened wide with recognition when he saw me, but remained flat and stony. Miranda was gone. The room stunk like a morgue.

Cody lifted his hand and gave a little wave.

I braced myself for what I had to do. I had my friends. I had my mission. There are no answers sometimes for the mysteries of life. But there comes a time when the questions don't matter anymore, when all you need is strength to finish the job.

Justin came up behind me and slipped the cool steel of the nine-iron into my hand, and whispered, "Do you want me to hold him down?"

THE FROST OF HELL

Ray Bannerman stared at the snow scurrying past the window, his eyebrows arching as a gust of wind rattled the pane of glass. "Ever wonder why the old Chapman place stays empty, Henry?" he asked, in the thoughtful manner with which he always began his stories.

I looked over at my friend, settled in my favorite leather recliner next to the fireplace. I let him have the most comfortable chair in the study because it usually coaxed a better story out of him. Ray never told a bad story, and he never shied away from the truth—even when the truth challenged the imagination. And as he is a man who enjoys the telling as much as the tale itself, I've no doubt these evenings are as pleasurable for him as they are for me.

I finished pouring our scotches and returned to my usual perch on the sofa across from him. "I admit I am curious about the house," I said, handing Ray his drink. "It's been empty since Liza and I moved to White Spruce."

"Then let me satisfy your curiosity," he declared, clearing his throat. "Tonight's as fine a night as any for ghost stories, and better for the storm."

He sipped his drink and made a satisfied face.

"Jacob Chapman was as strange as they come," he began, "yet he'd been my friend since before I could remember, so I resented all the gossip being spread about him. I'm sure you've lived in White Spruce long enough to know that when it comes to rumors, the magpies at Trudy's diner are judge, jury, and executioner. Poor Jacob never had a chance, not when his wife, Irene, started wagging her tongue about crazy things he'd been doing to her. Of course, not everyone pitied the woman. She was wicked, and sooner or later the wicked get what's coming to them."

I nodded in agreement.

"I used to reside in that old Colonial up the street from you, the one on the corner with the circular driveway and wraparound porch, do you know it?"

"I know it quite well. I've always admired the house and its gardens."

Ray tipped his glass at me in salute. "Anyway, that's how I knew what was happening to Jacob in his own home—we lived across the street from each other, see?—and can deny with impunity most of the rumors about him."

"Most?"

Ray looked down and studied his drink. "Some things people said about Jacob were true. And some of them were pretty bad, unfortunately. I had to move away after Jacob's death and leave the home where I'd raised

both my children. I couldn't take living across from that house anymore. I needed a fresh start, to live around people who'd never heard of Jacob Chapman. But I couldn't stay away for long. White Spruce is home to me and Lucinda, and always will be. But moving back wasn't easy. The first time I saw the Chapman place again, I thought I was going to have a heart attack right there on the spot, so terrifying were the experiences I'd had there."

Ray glanced over again at the thrashing storm. He wore the troubled expression of a man backtracking through unpleasant memories.

While I waited for my friend to gather his thoughts and resume the story, I thought about the day I'd met Ray Bannerman. It was through our town historian, Mabel Hoffman, who introduced us while I was doing research for a local history book I was writing. At one point a deputy mayor and history buff himself, he was eager to share his knowledge of town legends and lore. He claimed to possess land deeds, documents of legal proceedings between settlers and indigenous peoples, and even a personal diary of the first governor of New Hampshire himself.

At seven o'clock the following Friday evening, Ray came to my house and regaled me with stories about fascinating people and events from White Spruce's early colonial days, and revealed his treasure trove of artifacts and sources to me. It had helped make my book a modest commercial success. From the experience we formed a bond, and maintained the ritual of storytelling on the third Friday of every month since.

I watched the exuberant flames of the fireplace

paint shadows across Ray's face. For a man pushing eighty, the cracks and fissures of old age were curiously absent. A youthful intensity emanated from him like a beacon.

"Jacob was a man of means," he continued, with a heavy sigh, "though you wouldn't know it by the way he lived. That was one of his peculiarities, the one people scratched their heads about the most. His father was a wealthy man who moved his family to Boston, where Jacob was urged to help run the family business. Eli Chapman had hung on to his money during the Great Depression and bought up real estate in large chunks while it was dirt cheap, like other solvent businessmen of his day, and emerged filthy rich when the country got back on track. Later he sold his investments for a ludicrous profit, and started a real estate firm called Chapman Realty—you probably bought this lovely home of yours from them. Most of New England had done business with Eli Chapman at one point or another."

"Eli was a hard man, bit of a bastard to his wife and mistresses the stories went; but to Jacob, he must have seemed like the devil himself. Eli took no pity on the meek. He was a callous and self-serving man who trusted no one, and felt if he had to scratch and claw his way to the top of the ladder, then he sure as hell wasn't going to give anyone else a free ride. Even his only son."

"Now we have a three-word phrase for that kind of person," I interrupted, unable to help myself. "'Tea party candidate.'"

"Nah." Ray shook his head, grinning. "Eli would've been picked clean by those piranhas."

Now it was my turn to salute him.

"Jacob had no head for business, unfortunately," Ray said. "He dropped out of college. Numbers weren't his specialty. He was also awkward and tactless around people, and preferred solitude. 'Heart of a poet' best described Jacob Chapman when he was a young man. Simply put, he was born into the wrong family, which happens from time to time.

"Anyway, he met Irene O'Dell in 1952, and was married some seven months later. He was twenty-three at the time. I think—and I'm merely speculating here—he married her out of sheer desperation and self-loathing. He was the type who figured he'd better take what he could get, whether he wanted it or not. The marriage placated his father somewhat, who now saw Jacob in a different light. Later, when he heard the news that Jacob and Irene were expecting, Eli gave him a second chance in his company, a position where he could prove his worth and earn his money, but Jacob failed at it. He felt disgust and shame with himself. Irene, I was told, was livid. It wasn't long before she started browbeating him daily for not earning the kind of living she felt she deserved."

"She only married him for the money."

Ray smirked. "You have a gift for the understatement, my friend. Jacob had now become the black sheep of his family. Even his own mother was treating him differently, as though she were unsure of what to make of him. Jacob believed Eli had poisoned her with lies about his intelligence and commitment to the family business. He used to tell me, 'I always wanted to stick my father's goddamn money so far up his ass he'd

have to open his mouth to make a withdrawal.' Because of this family rift, Jacob left Boston and moved here to White Spruce around 1956. Irene missed the city life, but allowed herself to be dragged along because back then divorce wasn't an easy option.

"It was during their first few years together here that things really began to shake apart. I met Jacob around this time when he started freelancing for our fine local newspaper, The White Spruce Tribune. I was a reporter at the time, working the local news beat, and often looked to Jacob for tips and angles on stories. He had a gift for divining news; some of the biggest stories we published about our quaint little community and its buried secrets came from Jacob's excellent research. He had a way of getting complete strangers to open up to him, a gift every great journalist possesses. Soon he was hired on as a full-time reporter, and we became fast friends. I liked Jacob, oddities and all, but there was a disquieting look in his eyes that suggested trouble was on the horizon."

"Are you saying you knew Jacob's marital difficulties were going to escalate?" I asked.

"Not that, exactly," he replied. "More like, he seemed haunted to me and very anxious all the time. You know how you can see in some men's eyes a shadow, like a vague hint of approaching doom?"

"A soldier going into battle would likely wear such an expression," I pointed out.

Ray pondered this for a moment. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Only it wasn't battle with a mortal enemy, in this case, but something much darker."

"What was it?"

"*Terror*, pure and simple. Terror of a kind that feeds on your failures and grows fat on your self-doubts until it emerges from the cellar of your mind and starts nibbling at the edges of your sanity, like hungry rats. Jacob had the bleak air of someone who knew he was losing his grip and was trying, ever harder, to hold on tight."

"The poor man," I said quietly. I was used to my friend's creative license and florid descriptions, but this time his words evoked a bitter chill of dread in me.

Here Ray paused again to pull a slim cigarette case from his sweater pocket. He stuck one between his lips and struck a match. The curling smoke grayed the air around his head, making him seem for the first time very old and tired.

"Jacob came to work one day in a fog, like he hadn't slept in days. His face was pale, his eyes hazy and distant. I didn't ask him right away what was wrong. We took our lunch together at Trudy's, and as we waited for our food to come he told me something that chills me to this day. 'She wants to kill me, Ray,' he said. 'I think she really means to do it.'

"'Who?' I asked, though I knew full well who we were talking about.

"'Irene,', he confided. 'She hates me. Thinks I'm a loser, a scumbag because I can't hold down a job in my father's company. She hates this town, hates our newspaper. Can't understand why I'd want to lower myself to such a despicable station in life—her words.'

"'Is that all?'

"'He's not giving us any more money,' Jacob said. 'My father. He's written me off completely, and now we're almost broke.'

"'And that's why Irene wants to kill you?' It was then that a grin washed over his face, wiping away the terror. He now looked full of prowling mischief, like an adolescent on Halloween night. Our food arrived, and the waitress gave him a nervous glance as she set our plates down and beat a hasty retreat back to the kitchen. Jacob's unfortunate reputation at Trudy's had begun.

"'That's not why she wants to kill me,' he whispered conspiratorially. 'It's because of what I said to her last night.'

"'What did you say?'

"'After we were done in the bedroom, I told her a corpse was warmer between the legs than she was.'"

I'm ashamed to say I bit my lip to keep from laughing. The mental image of a prudish woman's appalled expression rose in my mind. I could only imagine how the rest of the night must have gone for poor Jacob.

"As you can see, Henry, honesty was not one of Jacob's faults, but Irene was not a woman to trifle with. I used to watch them in public, the rude glances and outright insults she'd heap on him, as though she were speaking to a slow child. Her bitterness and resentment were spilling over into every facet of their public and private lives, and she made nothing of it to the ladies in town that she blamed Jacob for keeping her from the money she so rightly deserved.

"'She's the frost of Hell,' he told me after lunch that day. 'The iciest bitch on the planet.'

"As we were driving back to the office, he added, 'Maybe I should do it first, Ray, what do you think? Kill her before she kills me. I mean, violence isn't my style, and there's no way I could do it pretty and clean, but isn't it like self-defense, when you know it's coming?'

"As you can imagine, I was in a bit of a quandary here. My advice to Jacob was to work things out with Irene—what else could I say?—but I sympathized with him. It couldn't be easy living with her now, if it ever had been.

Ray stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table. "The deterioration of Jacob's mental health was now in full swing. The rats were doing their job admirably. Over the next few months he started missing work and writing sloppily. Once he even threatened a farmer with a stick of hickory over whose child his daughter was pregnant with, because he wanted to be the first to break the story. It was apparent his priorities were out of whack; he seemed too preoccupied by the problems in his personal life. When our editor pressed him for an explanation—after calling in every favor he had with Sheriff Ferguson to get the assault charges against Jacob dropped—he provided nothing but empty promises that his performance would improve. He broke that vow the very next day, turning in a lurid piece about the mayor and a certain town councilwoman whom he accused without evidence of exchanging sex for political favors. Had we published it, the lawyers would've no doubt taken us to the cleaners.

"His physical health was declining around this time, too. He walked around most days gaunt and hollow-

eyed. I found out through a substantial amount of prying that Irene was planning to divorce him, and was using her considerable feminine wiles to convince Eli that Jacob was a sexual deviant."

"What could she have to gain by doing that?" I said, surprised. "She wasn't going to get any of the Chapman fortune at this point anyway, so why hurt Jacob even more?"

"Because she could," answered Ray coldly. "She was just that type of creature."

Another blast of wind slammed against the window. I thought about my wife upstairs sleeping peacefully, and felt a moment of profound gratitude for the wonderful years we'd spent together—and the years that were still to come.

Ray continued the story in a strained voice. "Then Jacob snapped one night. It was a possibility I was braced for, of course, but when it arrived it did so in grand fashion. I was assigned the uncomfortable—and some might say unscrupulous—task of reporting the story. I was his closest friend, my editor argued, and would have valuable insights. I appealed to his humanity, but he was a consummate newspaperman who seldom let his ethics get in the way of a great story, and he told me if I did a good job then I would get a chance to write a human interest piece on Jacob. I accepted, because I thought it would give me a chance to dispel some of the rumors swirling around town about alleged satanic rituals and sexual addiction—all lies that Irene had started—and defend my friend's honor. In the end, the editorial I wrote never went to press. Not enough dirt, I was told. The newspaper

wanted a glimpse into the sordid mind of a madman, but I wouldn't give it to them. Screw them. I found myself unemployed two days later, but I don't regret anything I said or done. Men have to have principles or else the whole goddamn world is as good as gone."

I slowly rose and refilled our glasses. We drank in silence for the next few minutes, listening to the storm outside, as Ray refueled for the next part of the story.

"The trial was quick but not painless," he sighed. "There were a lot of pictures to see from the crime scene. Irene's battered body was found at the foot of the stairs, her neck bent and broken at a nasty angle. Washes of blood, projected on the walls from the fatal blows, coated the upstairs hallway and bedroom. A major struggle must have ensued between husband and wife, because most of the furniture was jumbled like a tornado swept through the place. Irene's precious collection of porcelain bells was shattered, and the mattress was shredded and tipped onto the floor. A coat hanger, twisted and shaped into a crude weapon, was found clutched in her hand, probably in self-defense. But the most chilling image to emerge from the trial, the one that sealed Jacob's fate before his defense attorney could even call his first witness, was the police photograph of the two Mont Blanc pens stabbed deep into each of her eyeballs, deep enough they needed to be pulled out with a pair of pliers."

"Good night, Irene," I muttered, staring into the fire.

Ray cocked an eyebrow at me. He smiled slightly, but as soon as it appeared it dropped off his face, leaving him looking grave and sullen.

"The pens were a touch of irony," he added.

"Of course. He killed her by the tools of the trade she despised so much. I'd call that poetic justice."

"Nonsense. He was a writer, and what do writers have lying all around their house? Pens. First thing he saw, first thing he grabbed. The irony was incidental."

I nodded, knowing better than to argue a minor point when Ray was telling a story.

"The trial was over in less than a week. Jacob received thirty years in state prison. I knew it was going to be hard on him, but in court he appeared serene, like a man with an albatross lifted from his neck.

"I know what you're probably going to say, Henry, but when Jacob was released from prison on good behavior in 1983, I resumed my friendship with him. I was curious about how my friend held up behind bars all those years. And yes, maybe I had a morbid streak in me, because I was curious about his state of mind. Most locals had their doubts about his reformation. They treated him as some sort of pariah when he came back to White Spruce, even though most people were too young to remember the crime. Yet as deputy mayor at the time I wanted to set the record straight that Jacob was now a free man, and deserved a chance to reclaim his good name. I loaned him some money—his father was dust by now, and the cheap, heartless bastard didn't leave a penny to Jacob—and with my help he found a job at a paper mill, and eventually bought a house. The house across the street from mine.

"All was fine for a while. Jacob was grim, a little fidgety, but emotionally stable. He talked in a laconic

manner, but through our short exchanges I learned he was grateful for a second chance and quite possibly content for the first time in his long and difficult life.

"There was a new look about him now, however, that hadn't been there before prison, an evasiveness in his gloomy, colorless eyes. At first I just assumed it was an acquired trait from living so long in prison. God knows, you need eyes in the back of your head in such a place. Though Jacob got along peacefully and quietly, it was during his first winter back in White Spruce that things started to change. After a bad stretch of heavy snow and quick thawing, life for Jacob took a dark turn. It was the icicles that did him in."

"Excuse me?" I said. "Icicles, did you say? How on earth could a man be frightened of icicles?"

"To the imaginative mind," said Ray, "they could look like rows of razor sharp teeth, hanging like fangs from the gutters and eaves of houses."

"But, surely—"

"Jacob saw them differently, I think. To him, they represented the passage of time. Consider: like the hour hand of a clock, icicles change by such imperceptible degrees they can't be observed. As new water droplets freeze on the tips, they grow long in the tooth."

I snorted. "Your descriptive powers never cease to amaze."

Ray ignored me. I had the feeling now he was telling the tale more to expunge the haunting memories than for my own entertainment.

"The icicles drove him out of his mind. One evening I came home to the clanging sound of metal

striking metal, and there he was, atop a rickety ladder, swinging a claw hammer and knocking icicles off his gutter. I wandered across the street to talk to him. He was so intent on his work, he didn't even notice me standing behind him. I watched him work, swinging that hammer with a viciousness you'd expect from a man warding off attack. When he finally sensed me and turned around, I was struck by the terror pinching his face. His eyes were brimming with such fear, I asked at once: 'What's wrong with you, old friend?'

"He swung the hammer toward the last icicle weeping from his gutter, slashing the growth with enough force that it struck the house and chipped a shingle. Satisfied, he looked back at me with an expression of relief and satisfaction.

"'You've seen them,' he said. He stepped off the ladder and stood over the splintered shards of icicles like a proud hunter displaying his prized buck.

"I must have looked bewildered, because suddenly he was in my face, shouting, 'Didn't you see them? They weren't there last night! I know why they're here, and I can't let them grow. Understand, Ray? I can't let them ... bite.'

"'What'll happen then, Jacob?'

"He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then shut it again. 'Let's go inside,'" I said, slipping my arm gently over his shoulders. He was shivering mightily under his thick wool coat. I guided him up the steps of his porch and into the house. We stood at the kitchen table, peeling our layers of winter garb off in silence.

"Then Jacob started shivering uncontrollably,

despite the cozy warmth of the kitchen, and I helped him into a chair. 'It'll be all right,' I assured my friend.

"'You're not listening to me, Ray,' he said. 'I can't let those damn icicles grow on my house. They're ... from ... I don't know.'

"'What are you talking about?'

"'I have to keep breaking them before it's too late.'

"'They're just water,' I said, but there was no convincing him. He grew more agitated. He was starting to ball his hands into fists. He whipped his coat off and flung it to the floor and stormed out of the room. I followed him to the parlor, where I found him standing in the middle of the mostly empty room, staring up at the wall. A portrait of the late Irene Beatrice Chapman gazed imperiously down at us, the old bitch looking more Lizzie Borden than innocent victim, as the national press portrayed her during the trial.

"'What is *that* doing on the wall?' I asked.

"But instead of answering me, he raised a palsied finger and pointed it at the picture. 'That bitch!' he exploded. 'She's the one won't leave me alone. Dead should stay dead!'

"'What do you mean, Jacob?'

"'Your voice,' he said, meaning Irene's. He put his fists up to his temples and started to squeeze. 'Leave your goddamn voice in the grave, woman. I don't need to hear it anymore. There's no money for you, never was and never will be. Can't you just leave me alone?' Then he slumped to the floor. Alarmed, I knew I had to get my friend help, but who should I call? I was paralyzed with shock and indecision. Between his crime, his age, and the

probable abuse he suffered in prison, I feared it was all catching up to him now. I was sure he was having some sort of mental breakdown right before my eyes."

"I hope you left the premises immediately!" I cried, with admittedly embarrassing liveliness, from the edge of my seat. "You knew what the man was capable of."

"The truth, Henry, was that I couldn't help my friend or myself if I wanted to. I was fascinated by the picture on the wall. I stood just behind Jacob, who was sobbing like a child, and stared at Irene with a strange intensity. I felt her, Henry, looking back at me; I felt the intelligent awareness behind her stony eyes, as if Irene was sending me a warning: stay out of Jacob's affairs. And hers, too."

"Are you saying you were in communication with the dead woman's ghost?"

Ray kept his attention focused on the crackling fire. "I don't know," he said at length, "but if Jacob was losing his mind, it wasn't without help.

"Anyway, I helped Jacob into bed before leaving that night, and tried to push the whole incident out of my mind. I returned the next morning before work and found Jacob once again scraping icicles off his gutters, even chipping tiny ones off the outer edges of his windows, or wherever ice accumulated. He went about the task tirelessly, muttering blasphemies and threats to no one but himself. At that moment I committed myself to putting a stop to it. Neighbors were loitering on the sidewalk, whispering and staring strangely at my friend's erratic behavior. Children actually taunted Jacob through the open windows of passing school buses. I felt

embarrassed for my tormented friend, but I was also beginning to feel guilty and ashamed of myself for not doing more to help him.

"'That's enough, old man,' I said to Jacob, as I crossed the street. 'You're already disturbing the peace and it's only seven in the morning.' I had meant the jibe to sound friendly, but he wheeled on me suddenly and held the ice scraper up in the air, as though he meant to slice my neck with it.

"'Stay away from me, Ray,' he warned, his feverish eyes black and dilated. 'Don't take another step closer. I got work to do today. Gotta clear these damn icicles.'

"'They won't hurt you, Jacob,' I said quietly.

"'You don't know that,' he sputtered. And truth to tell, Henry, he was right. The more I stared at the remaining icicles on his house, the more uneasy I became. A few of the icicles were as long as a man's arm, crescent-shaped sickles that looked sharp enough to cut flesh. Were it not for the fact that his was the only house to have them, I might not have been so troubled by the impressive lengths of most of the remaining icicles. On that sparkling, clear-blue morning they were things of beauty, reflecting the sunlight like a million tiny prisms. There was a discernible air of mystery about them, too, like ancient stalactites growing for centuries in underground caverns.

"I took Jacob back inside, determined this time to stay with him until he either came to his senses or got the help he needed. I fixed a pot of coffee, and when it was ready I sat him down at the kitchen table and leveled my gaze on him.

"'Nothing is going to happen to you,'" I told him, in the most confident voice I owned.

"He stared dreamily into space, and when he spoke again it was a flood of non-sequiturs. 'Do you believe in ghosts, Ray? Doesn't matter if you do or don't because I do, that's what matters. Dark ones. Ever hurt? They know. Watch. Stab at it, it grows worse. Be cautious what you say, you know. I know. I dream not a dream that isn't red and tainted with sin.'

"'I think you need to talk to someone, Jacob,' I told him."

"He looked at me curiously. 'Who are you?'

"'I mean people whose job it is to ... help sort things like this out.'

"He stared out the large bay window, clutching his head like he was trying to massage away a headache, lips muttering quick and hissing syllables I couldn't quite catch. Then he put together a clear sentence I'll never forget: 'They didn't help us before, and when she comes back, it'll be too late to make her listen.'

"I was shocked. He thought Irene was attempting to reach him from beyond the grave. I could understand people being trapped in the past, unable to move on with their lives because of guilt or something else—but ghosts? It was beyond anything I had ever encountered in my rational world. Of course, I tried to get Jacob help, right there and then, before his rampant fear could tear his mind to pieces, but he refused, and in fact became belligerent. He pushed me away roughly as I reached to take his arm, and told me if I ever came back again, I would get the 'Irene treatment.' His countenance was a

madman's, and I was all too happy to finally get out of that house and away from Jacob before I found myself fertilizing the earth with Irene.

"Later that evening we had a blizzard come through, a real doozer with a bug up its ass that lasted for hours and buried us in twenty inches of cold misery. Worst one on record for these parts, if memory serves, and up till now it's been serving pretty well. The weather forecasters were caught with their pants around their ankles on this one, leaving them breathlessly proselytizing about how long and severe it was going to be. They didn't have Doppler back then, but they weren't reading tea leaves, either. No one saw the storm coming because it simply didn't exist anywhere on Earth an hour before. It struck with a howling fury, though, and we battened down for a long night.

"I was sitting in on a town council meeting that night. Nobody voiced any objections over the issues being discussed, or the taxes being raised. People were sensing the imminence of the storm, I think, and were worried and lost in thought. All the agenda items passed before the small and lethargic crowd. It wasn't until the end, when Councilwoman Kristine Randolph, she of the sex-for-favors rumor all those years before, asked if anyone had any further business, that Billy Potter, a well-respected dairy farmer, stood and informed us it was beginning to snow heavily, and that it was damn peculiar how it came out of a clear blue sky like that.

"Without objection, the meeting was hastily called to a close, and we dispersed in silence to our cars. The whipping snow had already piled at least four inches on

my car. As I drove home, the wipers had all they could do to keep a patch of windshield clear enough to keep me out of a ditch.

"After an hour's drive that usually took me twenty minutes, I was home and trudging my way up the sidewalk through the thick drifts of snow. Suddenly I heard a strangled cry through the fierce wind. Then, the sound of rending metal, like two vehicles in a high-speed collision. The source of both sounds was coming from across the street. As I squinted through the blizzard, I saw Jacob's house besieged by a luminous billowing tide of snow, whirling and thumping and banging on the walls. It wasn't the shutters making the noise but the wind and snow, as if a raving lunatic were trying to get in. The wind whooped with glee as glass started shattering. The whole structure moaned and even swayed slightly under the barrage of punishing gales and endless snow.

"The scream warbled one more time through the storm before dropping suddenly into silence. My legs were rubbery with fear, my lungs two frozen blocks of ice. I wanted desperately to run and get inside my house, but the storm immobilized me. With every bit of strength I possessed, I managed to turn away and flee into my house. Once inside, I shut the door and sobbed for my old friend Jacob. I knew I'd just witnessed an omen. I thought in the morning I'd find his house gone or Jacob dead. Or both.

"I went to bed early that night," he continued, "too distraught—no, make that too damn terrified—by what I'd seen to be soothed by the banality of television. I slept fitfully. Twice my eyes snapped open during the night. Twice I listened to what I thought were voices

outside my window. And twice I was too much of a coward to go look.

"At the first sign of dawn I scrambled out of bed and looked out my window. My heart nearly stopped. Jacob's house gleamed with ice. The icicles had grown to such lengths and thicknesses that they covered the whole front of the house like razor-sharp teeth clamped together. The snow was piled as high as five or six feet in some places—but only in *his* yard, Henry. No one else had that much snow and ice on their houses. I knew at that moment something had paid Jacob a visit the night before, something straight out of the frosty depths of Hell.

"I got dressed fast and went down to have a look," he said slowly, choosing his words more carefully now. Ice cubes clinked together in his trembling hand. "I knew before I even got there that I wasn't getting in through the front door. The icicles were thicker than prison bars. However, I gave it the old college try. I threw a shoulder against the ice, but all I got to show for my effort was a bruise. Next, I went back to my garage and got a shovel and an ice pick. I was determined not to leave Jacob in there, dead as he probably was, for the cops to find. He was my friend, Henry, and I had to see him first. I had to *know*, before the cops spun the story and buried the evidence to cover up what was bound to be the most sensational and unbelievable crime in town history ... second only, perhaps, to the murder of Irene Beatrice Chapman.

"When I got back to the house with the tools, I tried the ice pick first. I chipped away for a few minutes, but the work, I could see, was going to be slow. So I

picked up the shovel, squared up like Joe DiMaggio at the plate, and swing it as hard as I could. When it struck the icicles I thought the recoil was going to shatter my arms. I didn't even dent the ice. I stood there for a spell, hunched over while the ache in my shoulders receded, and thought about what to do next. Those icicles were as smooth and clear as polished silver, and I could see my reflection staring back at me. I figured it was useless to try to break through, so I tramped around to a side window where the ice was the thinnest. With one swing of the shovel the ice and glass gave way with a satisfying explosion. I brushed aside the fragments and slipped inside. The air inside was considerably colder than outside. My breath fogged and damned near crystallized right before my eyes. But it was the smell of copper—*blood*—that made me shudder."

Ray took a long, lingering draw from his cigarette (his third since the story began), and watched the waning fire gnaw at the few scraps of wood left.

"Well?" I asked eagerly. "What happened? Don't leave me hanging, Ray, finish the story!"

He looked at me solemnly. "I learned that day how sometimes you have to leave people well enough alone. Otherwise, they'll drag you into their private hells. There I stood, in Jacob's freezing house, calling out his name. Nothing. The silence was absolute and startling. I could hear my own skittering heartbeat and ragged breathing with perfect clarity. A dreary blue light filled the house. The foreboding in there was crushing; I think I knew what it must be like to be buried under an avalanche, with no hope at all of being discovered.

"'Jacob!' I called again. I listened to my voice echo

and die away, and started down the hall. I passed the living room. The curtains were opened and I saw to my amazement how much more the icicles looked like clenched jaws from in here, sealing Jacob inside. As I unsuccessfully tried to ignore my growing horror, a wet noise somewhere off in the house startled me. It sounded like a clump of snow striking the floor above me. I hurried up the stairs and down the hall, screaming Jacob's name again and again.

"His was the second room on the right. I knocked twice on the door, and opened it before losing the nerve. The knob turned stiffly. As the door swung open, a quick and powerful gust of frosty air slammed the door back against me. I should have taken the hint. But I persisted, and pushed with all my might until the door gave way and let me in.

"Inside, I found death, Henry. Like nothing I'd ever seen before. I screamed. It wasn't the blood that did it; truth to tell, I'd seen more during my stint in Viet Nam on a good day. It was what had been done to the eyes."

He left that last sentence to the mercy of my imagination as he stubbed out his final cigarette of the night.

"What I discovered was Jacob's frozen body, his lips drawn back and his mouth contorted into a bloody grimace of agony. His shirt was torn open and his pants, God help me— his pants were down around his ankles. His throat had been ripped open savagely, a ragged, gaping hole in the middle of his icy blue neck. And the eyes: two icicles, each the width of a man's thumb, were jammed into each socket, oozing grayish liquid down the

sides of his mottled cheeks. Blood froze around the edges of his eyes, but it must have been running cold that night, because it didn't melt the icicles one bit.

"Tall drifts of snow had blown in through the shattered window above the bed. Some of it was starting to melt and splat on the floor, and that's what I must have heard downstairs. There was a heap of snow on Jacob's body in the unmistakably curvy form of a woman. Maybe Irene had decided to loosen up after all, and in the end—true to form—gave him a cold place to stick it in one last time."

Ray finished the rest of his drink in a noisy series of gulps, and wiped the excess off his lips with a quivering hand. He set the glass down on the coffee table between us with a loud *clunk* that made my heart spike. I had the inkling of a new book I could write about White Spruce, this time focusing on the Chapman family legacy and murders, but I couldn't open my mouth to start asking questions. I decided I wasn't going to exhume the tragic history of Jacob Chapman just for monetary gain, and who would it benefit if I did? The story was incredible, utterly incomprehensible, completely absurd—except I saw in Ray's eyes it was also true. Not all truths are created equal, however. Some, I knew from my own personal experiences, were best cut from the vine of human experience and left to wilt in the dark, lest a thorn prick its human host. I realized Ray suffered many cuts from this experience, ones that left deep scars on his heart.

The howling and battering of the storm filled the suddenly quiet room. Ray stood and turned away from the

window with a dazed expression, much like the one he probably wore coming out of Jacob Chapman's house all those years ago.

"I should be going," he said.

"Why don't you stay the night," I offered. I wasn't sure if I was making the offer with his best interest in mind or my own. "Wait the storm out, at least."

He shook his head vigorously. "No thanks, Henry; like to, but I got to be getting home to my Lucinda."

Then he said what was on my mind, what I'd hoped he would spare me from hearing. "Might want to draw the curtains tonight, Henry, and pay no attention to what you hear. From the looks of it, this storm has a mind to stick around for a while."

I walked him to the door, thanked him for another memorable evening, and bade him goodnight. He hesitated on his way down the front walk, and glanced up through the tearing snow at my house.

"Got a claw hammer?" he shouted above the wind.

I followed his gaze. The root of an icicle was forming on my gutter like a teardrop.

"They're a good investment," he said, and disappeared into the storm.

THE LAST HOUR OF NIGHT

The house stood gray and forlorn at the edge of town, the lawn and gardens shrouded in mist and glistening with newly fallen rain. Elise enjoyed returning to the old Victorian home where she was raised, making the ritual of reminiscing a priority, never missing a year.

She loved the New England autumns, the tang of salty ocean air mingling with burning leaves, and admired the delicate hues of reds, oranges, and yellows bleeding from the maples and oaks. She took a deep breath as she paused on the empty sidewalk, thinking, *You can drive ten thousand miles and still stay where you are.* She heard that in a folk song once a long time ago. She couldn't remember who wrote it, but it didn't matter. It was true that some places—and people—remained untouched by the passing of time.

The clouds were clearing as dusk settled over the town, the western sky a rich ocean of sapphire. Crossing her arms, Elise shivered in the brine-scented breeze skimming off the nearby harbor. She heard laughter from some of the houses around her, jubilant preparation for

the night of festivities ahead. Halloween, with its promises of fun frights and illusions, was waiting to spring on the excited children. Up ahead, a door to a lovely little Cape Cod sprung open and a boy and girl in costume scampered down the sidewalk toward Elise. She smiled and waved as the pirate and the princess swept past her, and watched them disappear into the gathering shadows of another front yard. So much fun to be young, she mused.

Her smile dimmed as she continued toward the house.

Elise wished her own home could resist the ravages of time like the rest of the town. She stopped at the edge of the worn fence bordering the melancholy property. She had never felt as tired in all her life as she did just then. She gazed up the sloping walk at the three-story dwelling, with its white paint and blue trim peeling and fading, the weathered shutters slanted under the oppressive weight of disrepair. She felt the many dark windows watching her, challenging her absence. *Where have you been, Elise? Why have you been away so long?* Its inquiries were ceaseless and insistent.

The house sat in a wreath of fog around its foundation, as though it were sinking into oblivion. She blinked a few times and stared, but finally decided the hallucination was the product of a foolish imagination.

And you have far too much of that, she thought. Seeing things that are not really there.

A neighbor's sudden cry interrupted her reverie.

"Come back here, Jasper!" The old man's cheeks were ruddy with cold. He wore pale blue jeans soiled and

patched at the knees from many hours of gardening, and a green cap with a John Deere logo on the front. A small black and white border collie yapped incessantly and bounded across the street behind Elise.

She smiled. Mr. McIntyre, of course. How could she forget? When she was a little girl he used to give her boat rides and let her play hide and seek in his back yard. He always pretended he didn't have the slightest idea where she was, even if her feet stuck out from behind a tree trunk or a clump of her bright blond hair betrayed her presence in a dark cluster of shrubs. She must greet her old friend, she thought. But first she must see to the house.

It was waiting for her.

Elise drifted up the stone path and entered the enclosed porch. Three chairs gathering mildew waited for occupants who had long since departed. She moved past them, her footfalls soft and hollow on the sagging planks. She dug in her pocket for the key. With it pinched between her thumb and forefinger, she pushed it into the lock and—

"Elise, my child, hurry! You won't want to miss this!"

She turned at the sound of the animated voice and saw her mother standing on the lawn, just as lovely as Elise remembered her, waving to her through the screen. Her mother's chestnut hair was laced with silver and rested softly on her shoulders. Her hazel eyes gleamed in the dying light. She eagerly urged her daughter toward her.

"Mother, you startled me." Elise joined her on the lawn, the porch door slamming shut behind her. "Sorry,

Uncle Mort!" she called over her shoulder.

An old man in blue bib overalls sitting in one of the three chairs lifted his head and mumbled some words, then quickly fell back to sleep again.

Her mother embraced her. "Your father's around back at the shed. Got something to show you."

Elise blushed. "Really, he goes through too much trouble for me."

"He loves you, darling, and only wants the best."

Elise followed her mother around the back of the house. An olive-green shed stood in the far corner of the yard, its door standing open. Elise heard the sound of her father's heavy work boots scraping on the floor. She found her father inside bent over and examining his work, a carving knife and a small hammer lying on a workbench beside him. He was a tall man, an imposing six feet with a muscular frame. When he heard Elise and her mother walk up behind him, he threw a sheet over the object and turned around swiftly to face them.

"I've been working on a little something for you, Elise," he said, with a crooked grin and his usual charming modesty. "It's a surprise. Even had your brothers helping for a while, fetchin' wood, that sort of thing. I don't know what our lives would be like without you. You hold us together in these tough times when other families break apart."

She giggled in anticipation as he gestured for her patience and turned back to attend to some minor detail under the sheet. After a moment, he looked back at her with a grin. "Okay, it's ready. Come see."

He stepped aside and swept the sheet off like a

magician revealing his greatest mind-bending trick. Both women gasped in awe.

"It's *beautiful*," Elise said, tears welling in her eyes. She came forward and ran her fingers over the smooth edge of the cradle's hood. The stained oak, ornately carved with a pattern of moons and stars, was designed by the artist she knew all along resided behind her father's stern demeanor. The cradle looked, and more importantly *felt,* just right for a baby.

Her mother beamed proudly. "You never cease to amaze me, Hyram."

"This is the best gift you could have given me," Elise said. "But you didn't have to go through all the trouble—"

"Nonsense," he interrupted. "I just hope Danny makes it home all right to see the baby when it's born."

"Yes." She glanced down at the swell of her belly and then up at the darkening sky. Their baby was almost ready to see the world for itself. She could feel every twist and turn inside her and desperately yearned for Danny to come home from war to be with her. She tried not to obsess over the horrible unfairness of it all—a war nobody seemed to want that tore apart nearly every family she knew.

"What's the matter, Elise?" Her mother felt her forehead with a cool, dry palm. "You look pale. Do you feel all right?"

Elise shrugged. "Just tired, I guess. I've had a long walk."

Her mother clucked her tongue and fussed with a lock of Elise's hair. "All this talk about Viet Nam and

worrying about Danny and the baby, it's no wonder you're exhausted. Why don't you go inside and rest for a while, take a nap. Everything's going to be all right."

"Of course it will, Mother." She gave the smile she knew her mother wanted to see.

Clamorous voices erupted in the yard behind her. She watched her younger brothers play with fake swords and play guns, zealously rough each other up before going out to terrorize the neighborhood for candy.

Soldiers. Eager for a game of death.

An icy wind suddenly knifed through her. She gasped at the intensity of sensation and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, night had dropped its cloak on the world and her mother and father were gone. The yard was still and silent once again, save for the skittering leaves at her feet.

"You must stay longer next time, Mother. I do enjoy the memories."

She turned away from the rotted shack leaning on its crumbling foundation—the roof long since caved in, insects buzzing softly inside—and cursed the pitiless way time flowed through her fingers. She could think of nothing else as she walked back to the house and entered through the back door. The same neglect that clung to the shed smothered the air in here. She stood in the kitchen, scanning the empty room. An old sink stained with rust. Cabinets suspended above the gap where the stove once stood. Counter tops bare of utensils and spices. Every year when Elise returned the house was the same—achingly hollow and immense. But the lure was irresistible. When it was time, she came.

"I'm home!" she declared, as she swept through the house's dark interior. She called for her mother and brothers but her voice fell flat, as if the house was stifling her cries. Dismayed, she sank to her knees in what was once the parlor and sighed. She must find the resolve to go on. This year might be different; this year she might be able to stay. If she can find them and catch them for good, before they disappear into ... well, there was no use worrying about it now. She knew the house's secrets only too well.

Gossamer cobwebs dangled from the ceiling and attached themselves to the scant pieces of furniture left behind. A plume of dust rose into the air as she drew herself to her feet. "Mother, you really do need to catch up on your chores. Just look at this place!"

A key rattled in the front door.

Elise held her breath, eyes wide, as Mr. McIntyre lumbered inside, blowing on his chilled hands. He wore a heavy suede coat zipped to the top. Jasper, the border collie he was bellowing at earlier, trailed in behind him.

"Good evening, sir," said Elise, "on duty again, I see."

He snorted indifferently and carried his thermos down the hall toward the kitchen. Jasper stopped short as he passed by and stared at Elise. A low growl started deep in his throat.

"You're a good boy, Jasper," she said. "Keep an eye on Mr. McIntyre."

The dog whined, dropped his tail and hurried away to catch up to his master.

"Already locked the back door when I came in,

Mr. McIntyre!" she called. "But you go ahead, anyway. It's very kind of you to make sure the house is safe and secure on Halloween night. Without you, the local kids would doubtlessly vandalize the place. Still, you must have better things to do tonight, don't you? What about playing Bridge—you always loved doing that at the church socials."

In the kitchen she heard him loosen the top of his thermos and pour the contents into the plastic cup.

"Coffee! What a wonderful idea," she said. "I'll brew some with a touch of cinnamon, the way Mother used to make it for us on evenings when we..."

A vision from the past suddenly bloomed before her eyes. Those evenings ... what did they used to do? Listen to the radio, pray before the TV as the cruel images of war and death flickered before them. She hoped—she bargained with God—to bring Danny back sooner rather than later, feeling in her core that he was somehow never coming home again. At least, not in a capacity to hold his wife and child again.

She choked back tears before they could overwhelm her. Sometimes she could still feel his body lying beside her at night, his warmth and his scent as real as the last time he held her. And if the wind was still she could almost feel his breath in her ear again, a soft tingle that warmed the darkness just a little, enough to let her know he was still watching out for her.

She stood and wandered into the kitchen, not watching where she was going, just trusting her instincts, the same ones that led her back to this house every year—

"What are you doing, Elise? "her mother admonished, taking the kettle from her hand.

Elise jumped in surprise and stared in astonishment at her mother's sudden presence beside her. The scratchy fabric of her sleeve and the warmth of her hand brushing hers brought the rest of her senses into sharp focus. She could even smell her mother's sweet floral perfume. Elise almost didn't want to answer her mother in fear the vibrations of her voice would shatter what must be a fragile illusion.

"I was just fixing a pot of coffee for Father and Mr. McIntyre," she said slowly. "No harm done. Besides, they work so hard and do so much for us."

"Of course they do," replied her mother, filling the kettle and putting it on the stove. "But they're not withered old men ... they can fend for themselves. You should be worrying about yourself and that baby. You need to rest."

Elise wouldn't argue, for it was useless to quarrel with her mother when it came to the best interest of the family and the little one inside her.

"And it doesn't help to worry so much about Danny," she added, setting her hands gingerly on Elise's shoulders and guiding her to the stairs leading up to the bedrooms. "You'll get sick. There's nothing we can do to help him except pray to our merciful Lord that He'll bring him home safely. What's done is done, and there is nothing we can do to change it. Do you understand, Elise? Worrying about the past never helps us get to where we want to be."

She understood. She just didn't want to *believe.*

They passed the living room, where her father and brothers sat huddled around the TV watching live coverage of the booming war, and paused at the bottom of the stairs. She stared up at the stirring shadows there waiting for her. Her room was the last one on the left.

The last one on the left.

A feeling of dread fluttered inside her as a vague memory attempted to take shape in her mind. Something ... about ...

She tried to lean on her mother for support, but she was gone.

The sound of the TV in the next room was also snuffed out, replaced by the hush found inside sealed catacombs and vaults.

She knew she *had* to go upstairs. There was something she had to see up there, and although she was frightened, the compulsion was too strong to ignore.

"I'm going up there," she said for the comfort of her own voice, which sounded thin and weak to her. "Have a good evening, Mr. McIntyre. Good night, Jasper."

She didn't wait for an answer. She was already moving silently up the tattered stairs.

The house moaned and creaked around her, played like an instrument by the cold wind soughing through the eaves, whistling through the cracks, and tapping at the windows.

She climbed two more stairs and stopped. She felt something watching her from behind, and whirled around in hopes of seeing her mother again and her encouraging smile. Instead she found Jasper standing at the foot of the

stairs, head cocked curiously and ears perked up. She thought she detected sadness in the dog's inquisitive brown eyes.

Can you see me? she thought. Can you join me upstairs? I don't want to face it alone. I'm afraid.

She came down and stroked the dog's coat. Jasper's fur bristled under her chilling touch and a sympathetic whine escaped from his throat.

"Get over here, Jasper! What are you looking at?" Mr. McIntyre snapped his fingers. The dog immediately pulled away from her and sat on the dingy linoleum at his feet. "Come keep an old man company. We'll be out of here just as soon as I finish my coffee and the hell raisers have all gone home." Then his voice dropped and she heard him mutter, "One day somebody will buy this old place. No such things as ghosts, Jasper, just a lot of superstitious people."

Ghosts. Elise smiled to herself. *What a quaint idea.*

"You have a fine dog, Mr. McIntyre," Elise told him. "A good watch dog. I should like a dog of my own one day. I never had one before. This house, you see ... it took every penny my parents had to afford it and raise my brothers and me. But you know that already. You've always been such a good friend of our family's. If you need me, I'll be upstairs in my bedroom. Traveling always tires me out so."

She turned without waiting for a reply and ascended the stairs swiftly and silently.

When she reached the landing, the anxiety resumed in the pit of her stomach, but she ignored it and pressed on. She stopped when she reached her bedroom.

The door hinges squealed as she entered the room wistfully. A musty odor of age and decay rose in the air as motes of dust swirled in the slanting moonlight. Nothing remained but her old four-poster bed, a small table—and a cradle in the corner of the room. Her heart sank when she saw it, a deep grief that squeezed her throat and chest.

Reluctantly, she moved away from the cradle and wandered over to the window. Jack O'Lanterns scowled up and down the street as trick-or-treaters tramped door to door, decked out in ghoulish masks and glittering sequined costumes. Elise envied their innocence, their long road of life just beginning.

Suddenly, she felt a strong presence glide up behind her.

"Lie down now, Elise," said her mother. Elise allowed her to guide her to the bed, relieved for the company and the distraction from her melancholy.

She sat on the edge of her bed and leaned back gingerly, bracing her stomach in both hands, thrilled at the fullness of life inside her ready any day now to be delivered. Her mother watched approvingly as Elise's eyelids drooped, all her worries fading as she sank into sleep's bottomless depths.

Then, from somewhere in the house, came the pounding of footsteps, running up the stairs and bounding down the hallway. Her door squeaked open and her father stood silhouetted in the door frame, watching them.

The band of muscles across her swollen stomach clenched with apprehension. She tried to sit up but a

sharp pain bolted through her lower back. She cried out, and was helped quickly to lie back down.

"Stay in bed, Elise," whispered her mother, her firm hands holding down Elise's arms. Her mother looked across at her father with an expression of annoyance and dread. Elise knew something had happened to Danny by her father's stony silence.

"What do you want, Hyram?" her mother demanded impatiently.

"Elise," he began, his voice deep and grave. "There's been an accident."

Shadows of odd shapes and sizes crowded the periphery of her vision. She had sensed their elusive presence, like a portent, since the day Danny shipped out. Now they were coming out into the open, and the horror that came with them made her want to scream and lash out. With ragged gasps and thundering heart, she waited for her father to finish explaining.

"A man from the army just came to the door," he continued tremulously. "Danny ... his unit was ambushed. They don't believe there are any survivors."

"No! It can't be him!"

She fought the strong arms that held her as she tried to swing her legs off the bed. Her father rushed in to help, laying his own weight atop her struggling shoulders.

He said, "They don't know for sure yet, Elise—"

She knew.

"—if there were any prisoners taken—"

Oh, God, not this, not the baby and me alone, he needs a father, help me!

"—but they believe everyone was killed. I'm so sorry, Elise."

She screamed.

Searing waves of agony ripped through her mid-section. A sticky fluid pooled hot and thick between her legs as her mother worked feverishly to control the spasms. Elise wrapped her arms around her stomach and prayed for deliverance from the intolerable pain and torment. Her screams turned to wretched sobs as she felt the tether to her child cut, its life no longer a part of hers but now belonging to the shadows crowding the room around her, their greedy arms opened eagerly to accept the tiny soul and carry it away. She fought to remain conscious but she was drifting, sinking into the shadows herself, feeling them tug at her with hands that were not exactly hands, whispering words not exactly words, pulling her away from her bed and her family and the life she still desperately tried to cling to.

With the last bit of strength she had left, she lifted her head and peered down at the damp warmth spreading out across the sheets, the stillborn child in her mother's glistening hands, and closed her eyes. She dreamed of red. And of a child's voice she would never know.

When it was over she opened her eyes. The room was carved into deep black valleys, the moon having long since set. A thin breeze touched her skin. She didn't remember opening the window, unless Mr. McIntyre had come up here and done it while she'd been sleeping, which she doubted. The breeze was nice enough, though, after the dream she'd just had, spiced with wildflowers

and a hint of the sea.

The last memory she owned of her life gradually faded, and an inky mist began oozing from the ceiling, expanding and forming a gateway of sorts whose dimensions were just as sinuous as the curves of time itself.

And then the others appeared, the shadows, moving about in their dismal abyss and calling her name. Souls adrift like her own, oblivious to destiny, prisoners to the chain of memory, walking the same path of heartache and sorrow, only to leave unfulfilled in the last hour of night. It was time to go, they whispered, and their lithe arms began opening to take her back. It was the same every year. The disappointment was so profound, it felt like a living thing inside her, restless and hungry. She resisted their summons this time, however, rolling over in the bed and looking away. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead on the cradle in the corner, hoping it would anchor her to this house so she would never have to leave it. *Leaving hurt worse than remembering.* Leaving alone, that is, without Danny.

"*Elise,"* they whispered, "*you cannot remain here. Come back with us."*

Why? Why did it have to be this way? But as she expected, there was no answer. Death never had answers, only questions. As she lay there trying to block out their lamentations, she caught a voice in the din that she recognized. The words were almost drowned out by the chatter of the others, but she heard them nevertheless, the same message repeated over and over, forlorn and probing.

"I'm here, Elise, I'm here and I've been searching for you but it's been so black..."

She peered reluctantly up at the darkness, fearing a trick of the shadows to get her to acquiesce, and saw the form drifting down to her.

"I'm here, Elise ...

"I'm ...

"here...

"...Elise." Then a presence lay beside her on the bed. A strong arm wrapping around her waist, a chest rising and falling with breath, soft lips brushing the nape of her neck. She turned to Danny and embraced him, elation at once eclipsing despair, and their kiss lasted for an eternity as they faded into the mist.

Into oblivion.